

# BRAVE AND BOLD

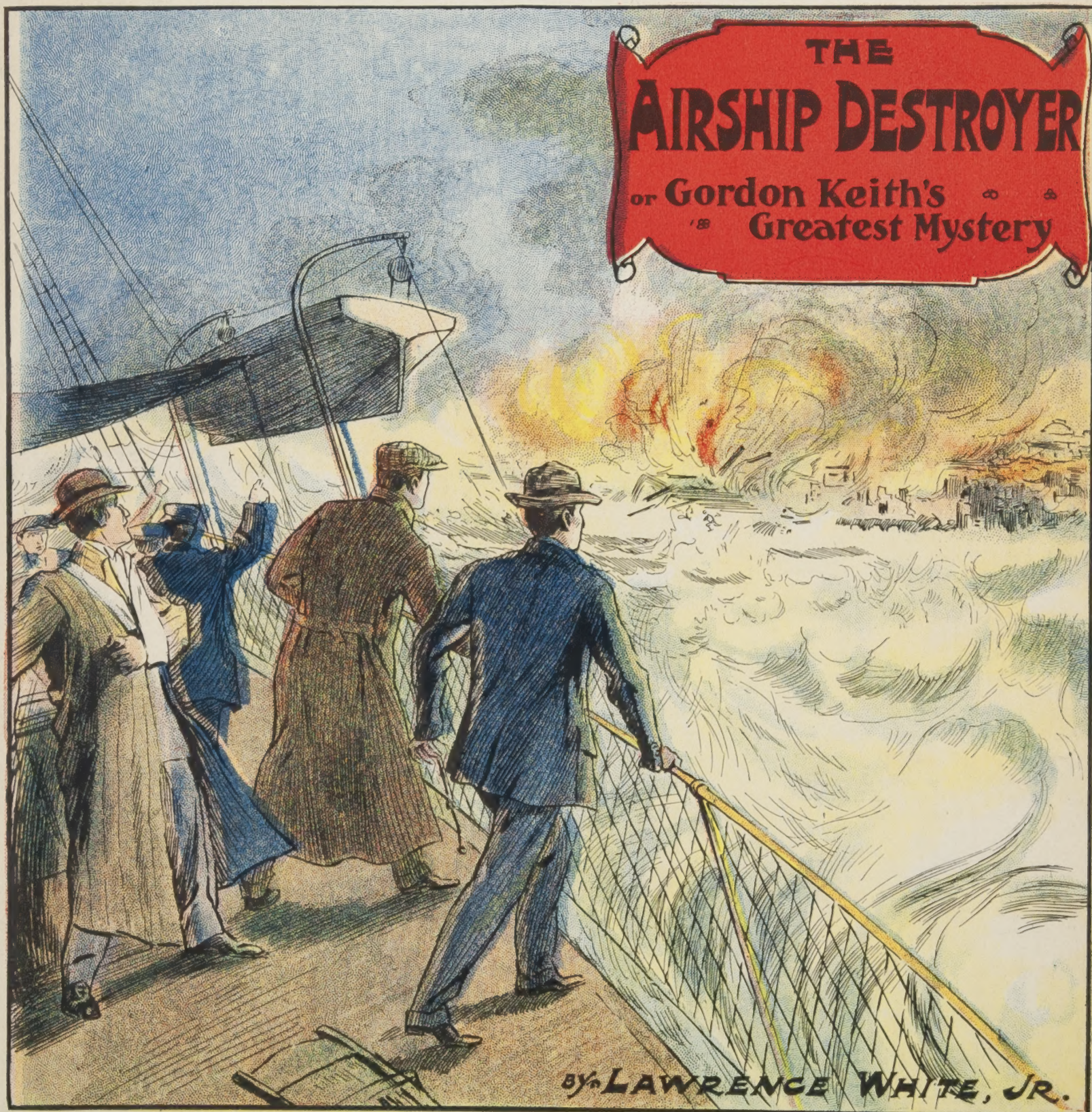
## WEEKLY

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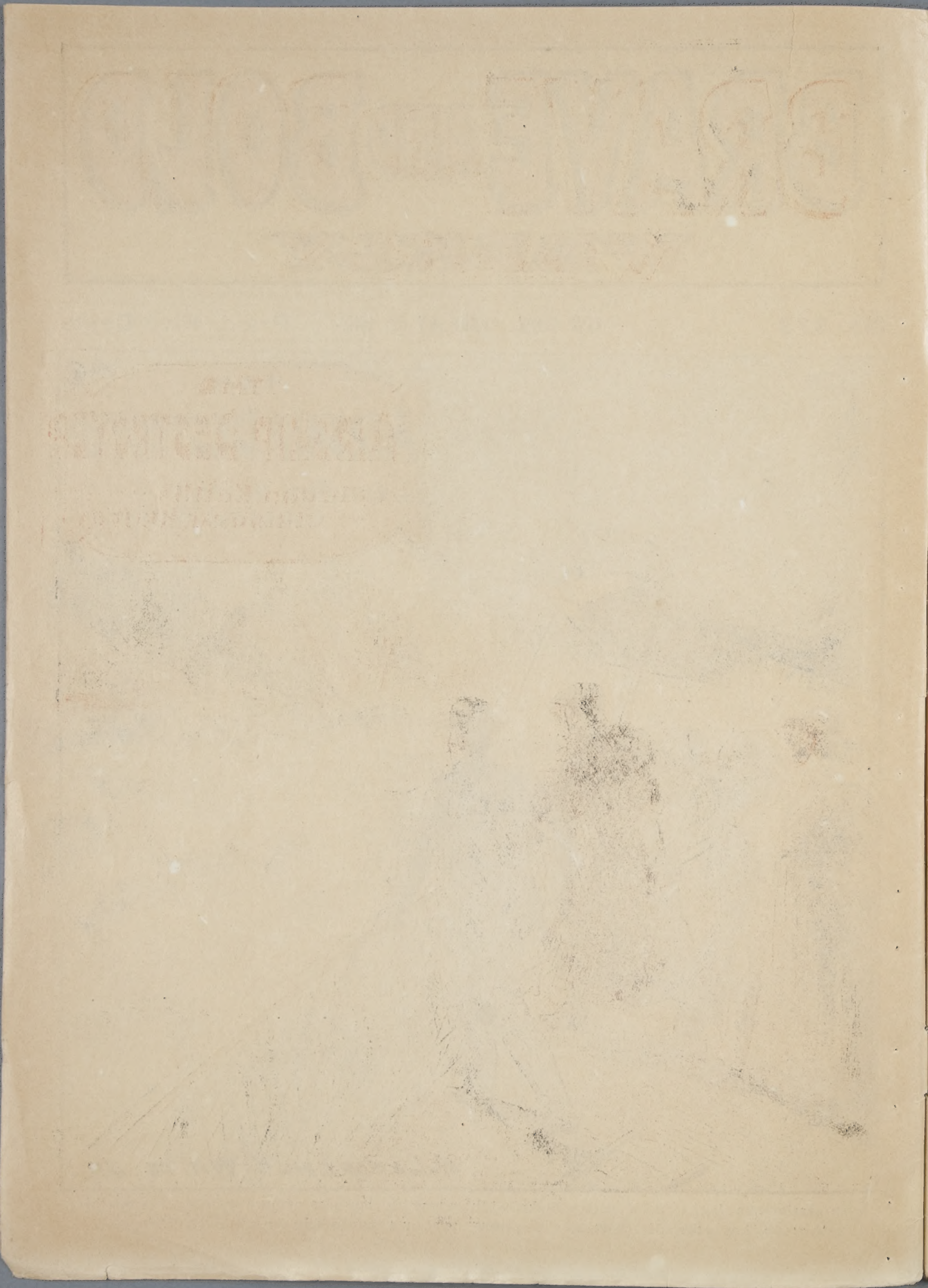


"An earthquake shock!" cried Sexton Blake, while he and his comrades gripped the rail. "A terrible catastrophe has occurred! Oldershaw, you must spare us a boat to help those in such dire need."



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# The Airship Destroyer;

OR,

## Gordon Keith's Greatest Mystery.

By LAWRENCE WHITE, Jr.

### CHAPTER I.

#### WHEN HEARTS ARE TRUMPS.

"Hearts!" said the pretty girl with the white face.

Her partner flashed an impassive look at her. He was an ex-ambassador, and for forty-five years had hidden his feelings behind those grave, unimpassioned eyes of his. He had lost a good deal, but no one could have guessed the fact, judging from his calm exterior, and the absolute steadiness of his long, white hands.

"We accept them on hearts, partner?" said second player.

"We double them," answered her partner quietly.

The dealer rearranged her hand in an endeavor to conceal her emotion. Her call on hearts had been a fair one, yet, since it was doubled by her opponents, it was clear that her partner, the ex-ambassador, must have a wretchedly weak hand. Second player led, and dummy put down his cards. A grim smile lifted his white mustaches; then he drew out his cigar case and began to smoke with ambassadorial dignity and composure.

Dealer looked across at the displayed hand of her partner. Yes; it was indeed a miserable one. She had not even a fighting chance of securing the odd trick. And as stakes were very high, and as she had been losing steadily, she lost her nerve, and dropped a couple of tricks needlessly. The round was soon over.

"We are twenty-four by tricks, and you take simple honors," said the third player, marking the score. "That gives us the second game, and the rubber."

He broke open a fresh pack of cards, and commenced to shuffle them with great dexterity. The ambassador watched him curiously, and wondered if it was all just as fair and absolutely aboveboard as it seemed. For this handsome

fellow, with the dark complexion of the South, and his beautiful partner, with a foreign accent, adorable gowns, and lovely jewels, had been having a truly amazing run of luck.

And the ambassador remembered that, on the few times he had met them at social functions and card parties, they generally happened to be together; that when play was for low stakes, these two were to be found at separate tables, while when play ran high, somehow or other they contrived to be partners.

They cut for deal.

"Yours," said the girl with the foreign accent to the ambassador, and with a delightful smile. "I hope the luck will change for you."

"You are very good. It is always lucky to have so charming an opponent," answered the ambassador, as he made the cards fly round.

His partner—the pretty girl with the white face—took up her hand. With a great effort she compelled her attention to concentrate itself upon the round. She was quite young—not more than eighteen—with a great mass of lovely brown hair, eyes that could hold a well of affection, and a pair of red lips that made many a man's heart beat fast.

But just now the eyes were narrowed with anxiety, and the lips pale with fear. A brilliant spot of red burned in either cheek; it was the hectic flush, the fevered glow, of the gambler. A player at another table, chancing to look across, murmured, "What a pity!"

The first game of the new rubber dragged somewhat, then fell to the credit of the dark man and his beautiful companion with the foreign lisp. The second was commenced, the deal falling to the ambassador. He gathered up his cards and looked at them critically.

"I leave it, partner," said he tranquilly.



An expression of triumph leaped into his partner's eyes. The declaration was left to her, and she had a strong hand. There were the ace, king, queen of hearts; ace, king, queen of spades; king, queen, knave of clubs, and some decent backers. Her one weakness was diamonds. But clearly she must take the two-to-one chance and trust her partner for diamonds. Yes; there was but one thing to do.

"No trumps," she answered, making the highest call.

"Shall we play?" said the third player, the girl with the foreign lisp.

"Doubled," said her partner promptly, and threw down the ace of diamonds.

The girl who had declared leaned back, suddenly faint. The dreaded suit of diamonds had clearly fallen to the worst possible hand, for it was the lead of her opponent—the olive-complexioned man. She was dummy, of course, and the first card being down, she displayed her own hand.

"Very strong!" grunted the ambassador, looking across.

But mine is a freak hand," said he who had led. "Indeed, we need not trouble to play it. I have twelve diamonds, including the ace, king, queen, knave, and ten, and the ace of clubs. Every trick is ours. A hundred and sixty-eight by tricks, and forty for the slam. The rubber is ours. An extraordinary hand; I have never seen its equal."

"Nor I, sir!" said the ambassador.

It needed a quick ear to detect the faintest touch of irony in his tone, and possibly the olive-complexioned man had that faculty, for he looked up at the speaker with a curious, shifting glare in his dark eyes.

"Ah! you no longer find my company delightful, excellency?" said the dark-eyed beauty, for the ambassador had risen.

"I could never say so, signorina; but I do not think my partner is very well."

He spoke truly. The girl had attempted to rise, but all her strength seemed to have faded with the blood from her face. Her partner crossed over to her assistance, but the other man was before him.

"Take my arm!" said he, almost sharply. "Let me lead you into a cooler place!"

They wound their way past a good many tables, and entered an alcove, out of which a door opened into the garden. It was a hot, starlit night, and the perfume of a thousand roses hung in the heavy, dew-saturated air.

"Sit down," said the man to his companion, motioning to a garden seat. "I fear you have lost heavily to-night."

The girl sank upon the green-painted seat. The effect of the cooler air upon her overwrought nerves was to make her tremble violently.

"In fact, during the past few weeks, I believe that you have lost—shall I say more than you can afford?"

"Ever since I knew you," was the sudden answer, delivered in high-wrought, excited tones.

"What do you infer by that remark? I hope nothing unpleasant. Before you met me I believe you played bridge for twopence-halfpenny a hundred points, wasn't it? Or shall we say tenpence? I introduced you to people who knew the game—like myself. You tasted the joy of it, the thrill that comes when five hundred pounds or so hangs upon the turn of the rubber. At first you played badly—that was your own fault; then the luck turned against you—which was no fault of yours. But you must not blame me."

"At least, it was very fortunate, from your point of view, that I was so often your opponent!" retorted the other hotly.

"I will pass over that disagreeable observation because I perceive that you are scarcely mistress of yourself, my dear young lady. You owe large sums to other people besides me. Be frank. What do you owe?"

For answer the girl broke out into a passion of weeping. Dry, husky sobs tore her slender form with their violence. This night's play had been the last straw. She was ruined—

ruined in ways which she would not have revealed to this man, even if death by torture had been the option.

Her companion watched her, utterly unmoved. He drew a cigar from his case, bit off the end with his strong teeth, and lighted up. Slowly the storm of hysterical crying died down. The girl attempted to rise, but her companion laid a protesting hand upon her gloved arm.

"Let me go!" she cried out, shrinking from his touch as if he had been a rattlesnake.

"In a moment—yes. But at first I want to make you an offer. I want to help you."

"Help from you? Never!"

"Why not? Because I have taught you to play bridge as it should be played, that does not mark me a scoundrel."

"But that is what you are! I—I feel it when—whenever you come near to me!"

The man turned pallid. He had not expected this. He tossed his cigar into a bed of lilies and tugged with both hands at his mustaches.

"Do you know what you are saying to me?" he demanded.

"I hate you!"

"Well, listen. You will not tell me the amount of your losses, so I must hazard a guess, which I believe to be near the mark. I will say that, since I have known you, you have incurred debts to the amount of fifteen hundred pounds. That is a serious sum for a young girl like you to owe. I am going to overlook your insults, and suggest that I give you a check for just that sum."

"I would sooner die than touch it!"

"Ah, but take a minute to reflect! Consider your parents. I know them. When they learn of this matter it will be very serious for you. You have but to say the word, and I relieve you from your terrible anxiety."

The girl drew in her breath as if she had been stabbed.

"You will not give me such a sum without making a condition," she answered.

"Ah, now you are becoming reasonable! Of course, there is a condition attached, and I will name it bluntly. Marry me!"

The girl sprang to her feet as if the proposal had been a blow. At the same moment there was a slight rustling close by, as if some one was moving there in the darkness. The sound escaped both of them.

The girl flashed a look at her companion that stung him to the quick. It was a look of horror, of loathing, of contempt. In another second she would have fled, but he caught her by a slender wrist, and held her with cruel violence.

"Listen!" he hissed, his fierce-glowing face close to hers. "Consent or not, you shall be mine!"

"You villain! You coward!" cried his companion, and struck him in the face with her clinched fist.

"Villain I may be; but coward—no. Listen to me. I have ruined you because I love you, because I mean to win you. Do you hear that? And if you refuse me, I know how to act. You are in my power, and if I have to crush you to win you—so be it."

"Let me go, or I will scream for help. You snake—coward—cheat!"

With the words the girl broke from him and fled toward the house. He stood looking after her, ghastly white with rage, trembling with passion. Slowly his face cleared; he drew a deep breath. He muttered, in a perfectly calm voice:

"Snake—coward—cheat! For each of those words I will exact a punishment and a revenge!"

## CHAPTER II.

### SIX MEN AND SIX HATS.

"Checkers," said Gordon Keith suddenly, "I have come to the conclusion——"

He stopped, pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his



pipe with a thoughtful air. Checkers waited expectantly; even Pedro, the great bloodhound, stretched on the sheepskin rug before the fire, lifted his ponderous ears a trifle in anticipation.

For a whole hour the great detective, reclining in the depths of his largest chair, had been plunged in reflection.

"I have come to the conclusion," said Keith again, then began to light his pipe.

"Am I to pack, guv'nor?" said Checkers.

Pedro rose to his feet, and yielded to an enormous yawn.

"That Lady Greenacres is not a person to be respected," concluded the detective calmly.

"Is that all?" said Tinker, scarcely concealing his disgust.

Pedro stretched himself flat again.

"I do not like Lady Greenacres," went on Keith, puffing at his now glowing briar.

"No?" answered Checkers, in a tone which rendered a verbal expression of the rest of his thought—"And I'm sure I don't care either way"—quite needless.

"I entertain a strong dislike toward Lady Greenacres," went on the detective, after a pause of nearly five minutes. Here Pedro uttered a profound snore.

"In fact," said Gordon Keith, "Lady Greenacres is the sort of person for whom I have the most cordial and thorough hatred, and whom I should have much pleasure in exterminating, root and branch, and for all eternity, from off the face of this terrestrial ball which we call the earth."

"It's beginning to rain," said Checkers.

The bloodhound redoubled its snoring.

"Good heavens!" cried Keith, springing to his feet. "To think that we spread poison about to kill rats, and leave unharmed such ghastly specimens of humanity as are represented by Lady Greenacres! She is a worldly, selfish, grasping, treacherous, cruel old gambler. Goodness knows how many hearts she has broken in her passion for play; how many young lives she has ruined at her bridge parties. To win a thousand pounds she would soil the best of consciences. A heartless, unscrupulous old—"

"It's coming down fast now," said Checkers dreamily.

"Now, there was that pretty girl Verna Willoughby, the daughter of dear old Mordaunt Willoughby, now abroad," continued Gordon Keith, pacing up and down his consulting room in Baker Street. "A week or two ago I saw her playing at Lady Greenacres' town house in Portland Place. Her eyes were burning with the fever of bridge for high stakes. For opponents, she had two of the most expert card sharpers I have ever met—and I've known one or two, you will admit. One of them was a marquis! I remonstrated with Lady Greenacres.

"Bah!" said that old image of a woman. 'A little excitement will do her good.'

"But her father, one of my oldest friends, is a strong objector to playing bridge for big sums," I urged.

"The more fool he," was her pleasant retort.

"But, my dear Lady Greenacres, the opponents of that sweet young girl are not unknown to me. They wouldn't be allowed on a liner. They were practically turned out of two European capitals."

"How dare you speak ill of my friends?" answered that amiable old derelict.

"You call those wretches your friends, madam?"

"Certainly."

"I trust you did not introduce Miss Willoughby to them?"

"On the contrary, I did—at their special request. And now go away; you are putting me off my game."

"So I went away—out of the house—resisting a natural inclination to grasp that heartless ruin by her bony throat and do the world a good service."

"Guv'nor, a visitor!" cried Checkers eagerly.

"And a client, let us hope. We have done nothing since that Bakerloo Spectre, and— Come in!"

A dark-eyed man of about thirty years of age accepted the detective's invitation. He bestowed a swift glance round—a glance which seemed to take stock of everything, then bowed to the detective with some grace.

"I have the honor of addressing Mr. Gordon Keith, the world-renowned detective?" said he suavely.

Gordon Keith bowed and motioned the other to a chair. The bloodhound rose from the hearthrug, looked attentively at the visitor, then rolled down again as if satisfied.

"What a horrible brute!" said the caller.

"Your flattery does not extend to my dog," remarked Keith, with a quiet smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I have been the subject of an extraordinary adventure, Mr. Keith. An adventure which I can scarcely expect you to believe—occurring in a place like London."

"Where else would you look for such incidents?"

"I am glad to hear you say that, for that affair has made me somewhat anxious," returned the visitor. He moved his chair round so that the light was behind him. "My name is Miles Oldershaw," he continued. "Let me give you my card. You will see that I live, in rooms, quite close to you, in the Marylebone Road."

Gordon Keith glanced at the slip of pasteboard.

"At Mrs. Milton's," he said. "Ah, yes!"

The effect of the remark was to make the visitor start violently.

"You—you know the lady?" said he.

"I was once of assistance to her husband—some years ago. But let that pass. Now for your extraordinary adventure, Mr. Oldershaw."

The other now showed some hesitation. Suddenly he said, in a tone that had a ring of defiance:

"Are you acquainted with a foreign nobleman called the Marquis Raoul St. Anselm d'Ajuda?"

"Excellent!" cried the detective, leaning back and rubbing his palms. "Is it possible that your story has to do with the marquis?"

"It has," answered the visitor, and Checkers noted a sound of relief in his tone.

"Then you are going to tell me something worth listening to."

"I hope so. I went to the theatre last night, and after the play I went off on a stroll before returning to my rooms. I was passing through a narrow thoroughfare, ten minutes' walk from Piccadilly Circus, when a sudden gust of wind blew the cigarette from my holder. I was standing in a doorway to fix and light another when I chanced to notice a man in a long cloak pass along on the opposite side of the way. Suddenly he stopped, put his hat on the pavement, and walked round it three times. Naturally I thought he had had more liquid refreshment than was good for him. He replaced his hat on his head, stepped quite steadily across the road, and vanished. A second later I heard a door slam. He had vanished, apparently, into one of the small, darkened houses on the side where I was standing.

"By that time I had lighted my cigarette and was engaged in buttoning up, for a thin rain was in the wind. I was on the point of emerging from the shop doorway when I saw another man walking along the opposite pavement, and no sooner had he reached the spot where the first had stopped than he put his hat on the stones, and he walked round it three times!"

"He wanted to admire his headgear from all points of view," chuckled Gordon Keith, his eyes dancing with delight.

"His extraordinary action was followed by his crossing over and disappearing as the first had done," went on the visitor. "By that time my curiosity was aroused. I determined to remain where I was, in my dark corner, and see what happened. Five minutes passed and up came a third man. Will you believe me when I say that off went his hat, and round it he promenaded, in all seriousness, three



times? I must ask you to accept my assurance, Mr. Keith, that I am a moderate drinker, and——"

"Certainly—certainly. And this third fellow—he also vanished into the house?"

"He did."

"Without knocking?"

"I heard only the slamming of the door."

"Continue."

"I waited five minutes longer and up came Number Four idiot, who also waltzed round his hat. He was speedily followed by another; then came a sixth. I waited ten or twelve minutes longer, but nothing further happened."

The visitor paused and looked at Gordon Keith, for the detective had closed his eyes and appeared to be asleep.

"Ah, I wish I had been there!" said Keith.

"What would you have done?"

"I? I would have made idiot Number Seven."

"I am very glad to hear you say so, for that is precisely what I did."

"What!" cried the detective. "Capital! You are a man of spirit, for it is easy to see that peril lay that way."

"That is true," answered Oldershaw; "but I scented an adventure and was determined to pursue it. I crossed the road, walked down the street until I reached the same spot as the others, solemnly placed my crush hat on the stones, and circumnavigated it three times. Then I recrossed, and was just at the doorway of the house opposite when the door swung back, and a voice cried softly: 'Enter!' The word was spoken in Italian, which language I understand."

"Instantly the door slammed to behind me, and I found myself in utter darkness. I felt far from comfortable, I assure you. The voice of whoever had admitted me said in my ear: 'Take this mask; they are all wearing them for safety. They are on the first floor.'

"The mask was thrust into my hands and I fixed it over the upper part of my face, being very glad to have it, since it concealed the fact that I was a stranger. I groped my way forward and found the staircase by falling over the bottom step. I had half a mind to turn and back out, but I resisted the temptation."

"It does you credit," said Keith, intensely interested.

"I reached the first floor and saw a light streaming from below a doorway. For a second I hesitated, then rapped. A voice called to me in Italian to enter. I turned the handle and passed into the room."

"The six men who had preceded me were there, all masked, standing in different parts of the room, which was furnished with a few chairs, a small table holding a palm in a blue pot, a sofa, and carpeted. Almost instantly I noticed a young girl who was sitting upon the sofa looking terribly frightened, and exceedingly pretty."

"The six masked men greeted me with a respectful bow, and one of them said politely: 'You are late, marquis. We are all ready for you. Do not let us lose a moment.'

"As he spoke he whipped a deadly-looking stiletto from under his cloak, as did the others, and they formed a circle round the girl, the points of their weapons directed toward her. She gazed with an expression of frozen terror on the cold steel. As I said, she was very pretty, and I—I—well, to tell you the truth, I believe I fell in love with her there and then."

"And an exceedingly awkward there and then, too," replied Keith.

"The fellow who had first spoken now spoke again. 'We are gathered here in accordance with our orders—to see you married to this lady, marquis,' said he. 'Here is Fra Gaspar Luigi, who will effect the bond.'

"The turn which that gave me you can imagine, Mr. Keith. I had unwittingly walked into a nice little conspiracy. Those six scoundrels, one of them a priest, were gathered to see that poor girl compelled, at the dagger's point, to wed one of their friends. I was stunned with dismay, and I believe I should have made a bolt for the door

but for the fact that I felt I could not leave the pretty, frightened creature in the company of that horde of villains."

"To make matters more dangerous for me, there was the chance that the real and genuine marquis might turn up at any moment! If he did I resolved to test the power of a good British blow between his rascally eyes, then to chance a leap from the window."

"I had but an instant to make up my mind. I answered, putting a bold front on the matter: 'I thank you, signora.'

"We are probably strangers to you, marquis," went on the fellow; 'but we have no wish to conceal our names. Mine is Andreas di Caro; this gentleman's is Giovanni Roma; this—— I have forgotten the other names; but those two I have jotted down together with the title by which they addressed me during the ensuing ceremony. That title was the Marquis Raoul St. Anselm Stefano d'Ajuda.'

"What!" cried Gordon Keith. "you went through the ceremony of marriage?"

"My life depended on it. If they had guessed the truth I should have had six long stilettos in my heart!"

The detective nodded.

"And, of course, you and I know that such a ceremony was nothing but a mockery. In the first place I was not the man they called me; and in the second, the law would never recognize a wedding made in such circumstances."

"True; but you have omitted one most important point, Mr. Oldershaw. I refer to the name of the girl."

"Ah, there you have me!" answered the other. "That rascally priest used it in the course of the ceremony, but he said it in the merest whisper, with a meaning glance at me and then at the others. His idea was evident. He thought that I might not care to trust six strangers with the whole of the secret, lest one of them should prove a traitor. The ceremony was brevity itself. The girl was forced to respond, for whenever she hesitated a stiletto's point was held to her throat. Directly it was over I addressed my friends. 'Gentlemen,' I said, 'you have obliged me in a way which I shall never forget; and before long each of you will receive a proof of my gratitude. It is now my wish that this lady leave the house unmolested.'

"They all bowed gravely. I myself opened the door to her, escorted her downstairs, and into the darkened, deserted street. I meant to explain the situation in a few words, then see her to a place of safety; but no sooner did she find herself free than she darted away like a shadow, running with the swiftness that fear lends, and before I could do anything she was gone!"

"You may be sure I did not go back. And it was with a feeling of the most intense relief that I found my way to a cab and was driven home. That is all my story. If you can throw any light upon it I shall be thankful both for the sake of that poor girl who believes herself married to the Marquis d'Ajuda, and for my own sake, for I should dearly like to meet her again."

Gordon Keith knocked the ashes from his briar.

"And a very remarkable story it is, Mr. Oldershaw," said he. "The girl, of course, was decoyed to that house—by the way, you noted the number?"

"Seventy-seven."

"Good! She was decoyed there, and the gang met afterward. That strange signal of placing their hats on the pavement was the talisman which admitted each to the house, it being seen by the watching doorkeeper. You can give me some idea that will help me to identify the girl?"

"She was young, about eighteen or nineteen, fair, with brown hair and eyes, an oval face, and dressed in a blue opera cloak over a white silk dress."

"That does not assist me much."

"True, but you mentioned that the marquis was not unknown to you?"

"Quite right; but a more cunning, a more slippery,



scoundrel I have never met. However, you have provided me with what I feel is going to turn out a most interesting case. Please leave me your card. And, by the way, those stains upon your hands and clothes? You are not a working man as generally understood by the term?"

"No; I am fond of chemistry. I have my own premises and workmen, although I am a man of independent means. Is that all you wish to know, Mr. Keith?"

"I will not ask you anything further at present. I shall take up this affair with unusual zeal, for it would give me sincere pleasure to chastise that heartless, unscrupulous scoundrel, the Marquis Raoul d'Ajuda."

With the words Gordon Keith closed the door upon his client. He stood listening in an attitude of intense watchfulness until he heard the door shut downstairs; then, to Checkers' abounding astonishment, the detective uttered a roar of laughter.

"Did you ever—did you ever see anything like it, my lad?" he cried, brimming over with delight. "Nothing so good, so full of promise has come my way for a long time."

"But—but it doesn't strike me as being particularly funny," answered Checkers.

"Nor is it likely to be—later on. In fact, I expect we shall have enough excitement and to spare, for there is a perilous game being played right under our noses, Checkers, and a nice little mystery to be fathomed. Now this Miles Oldershaw—what do you think of him?"

"He seemed a decent sort, guv'nor," replied Checkers, puzzled by the detective's manner.

"Ah! you think so, do you? Well, I called him, to his face, a heartless, unscrupulous scoundrel."

Checkers stared, gasped, rolled astonished eyeballs.

"What!" he stammered. "You mean to say that—that—"

"I mean to say that we have just entertained the Marquis Raoul St. Anselm Stefano d'Ajuda!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### A MOMENT OF AGONY.

"And—and we have been listening to a pack of lies?" gasped Checkers.

"On the contrary, I believe that the story was a true one," chuckled the famous detective. "All the time he was speaking I was endeavoring to plummet his object, and I think I know it. The marquis was delayed, was late for the ceremony, and arrived to find that another—the real Miles Oldershaw—had been before him."

"But how could he tell who had taken his place?"

"Simple enough. Unknown, possibly, to himself, the real Miles Oldershaw was followed from the house by one of the gang, who found out all about him—his name, pursuits, and so on. This information was imparted to the enraged marquis."

"But why should he come to you?" asked the still puzzled Checkers. "This affair is against himself. Why should he go to so much trouble to bring you, of all people, into it?"

"There is an obvious answer to that question, my dear Checkers, although I trust it is not the true one, since it would make this affair shallower than I hope to find it. That answer is—the girl has flown, as we have seen, and our friend the marquis wants me to find her for him. He perhaps flatters me by believing that if there is any man in London who could discover her I can. I am sure that we shall not see him again—not as Miles Oldershaw. He will be content to watch my movements secretly, and when I find the girl he will know how to act. This fellow is so daring, so impudent, that he has arranged to use me as his tool. Did he not tell that story well? It may have hap-

pened exactly as he narrated it, or there may have been some minor differences. At any rate, it is clear that a stranger of the name of Miles Oldershaw got into the house in Smoke Street and upset the plans of that nest of conspirators. By to-night I hope to see the situation perfectly clearly. Our first step must be a visit to Number Seventy-seven, Smoke Street. You will proceed there at once, and loiter about near the house to see if any one goes in or comes out. I will join you later on."

Checkers departed, and Gordon Keith, from the depths of his armchair, pondered the situation through a cloud of tobacco smoke. He was amazed by the sheer audacity of D'Ajuda, and delighted that he was called upon to measure swords with the marquis.

"A man who has won thousands by cheating at bridge," he reflected. "He has drawn upon me first. Very well! It shall be a fight to a finish—a duel to the death!"

Accomplished rogue though the detective knew his opponent to be, he had yet to learn how desperate was the aim the latter had in view, and how desperate the courses which the marquis was prepared to go through to achieve it. The coming night, with its terrible peril, was indeed to clear up many points. It was also destined to show Gordon Keith that in the cunning duel he was opposed by a master of fence, and that long and sharp must his weapon be and untiring his arm if he hoped to break down his enemy's guard.

"The Marquis Raoul St. Anselm Stefano d'Ajuda!" murmured the detective softly. "Breaker of women's hearts, card sharper, duelist, debonair, handsome, and not without courage! How well I remember that occasion in Berlin when I saw Mordaunt Willoughby kick him out of the card room, at the club, down three flights of stairs, past the grinning waiters, and, planting his right foot in the small of his back, propel the cheater clean into the muddy roadway in the middle of the Wilhelmstrasse! I see his pallid face now, his glaring eyeballs! And so Lady Greenacres introduced him to Verna Willoughby, did she? That is a matter which will bear looking into."

When Keith left his famous rooms in Baker Street he walked out into a thick fog which had descended with the night. He darted off quickly, turned into the first side street he came to, and stopped, scanning intently the faces of all who passed him. He had half expected to be shadowed by D'Ajuda.

"This fog is lucky," he muttered; "and he will certainly not expect me to visit the house in Smoke Street, which I shall almost surely find empty. But I must begin somewhere."

Followed by Pedro, the detective started for his destination. As he drew into the heart of the West End the fog lifted somewhat. Ten o'clock was striking as he reached Smoke Street, which was scarcely more than an alley. Tall houses fronted the dirty roadway, and a glow of light through the mist showed where a dozen poor little shops stood adjacent to each other on one side of the thoroughfare. Suddenly the bloodhound leaped forward eagerly, and Checkers appeared.

"Well?" asked Keith.

Checkers was excited.

"There was no sign of life in Number Seventy-seven until an hour ago," said he. "I was standing by the railings before the house, concealed by the fog, when I heard a window smash high overhead. I am sure the sound was followed by a scream, which was choked off suddenly. Nothing further happened until five minutes ago, when a man came out of the house and went up the street in that direction. I did not follow him, for you had ordered me to remain here."

"And quite right, too. It was a girl's scream which you heard?"

"I think so."

"Queer—queer!" muttered the detective.

"I have been wondering if the marquis sent you here to entrap you, guv'nor?" Checkers suggested.



"Then he shall have his wish," answered Keith; "but he will have to entrap my six-shooter as well, to say nothing of our friend Pedro. Come along! We will try an open course first," and the detective mounted the six unwashed stone steps before the door and thundered for admittance.

The knocking reverberated through the house, but there was no response. No light streamed through the grimy windows. Keith drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and tried each one, but without success.

"I could manage to beat in the lock," said he, "but there are one or two people about, and it would look suspicious. I might call the aid of the police; but, as you know, I rarely do so unless at an extremity, yet to get into this place I am determined. I noticed the window of a tiny attic just over the edge of a parapet on the roof, but, not being flies, we cannot walk up four stories of bricks. Come away a little distance. A pipe of tobacco may give me an idea. Ah, ten thousand maledictions!"

"Whatever is the matter?" cried Checkers.

"I have come without my tobacco pouch."

"Perhaps one of these shops may be a tobacconist's?" suggested Checkers.

"Checkers, you are full of ideas!" said Keith. "I'll go and see," and he went off with his long stride and vanished in the fog. He returned in a few minutes, and Checkers at once saw that he had an idea.

"What do you say to a climb over half a dozen roofs, my lad?" he asked, in as delighted a tone as if he had said: "What do you say to a nice little dinner at the Trocadero?"

Checkers showed no disposition to jump for delight.

"It's a bit foggy for that sort of game, isn't it?" he suggested.

"Down here, but not up there. Listen! I got an ounce of bad tobacco in that shop and a good idea. It is kept by rather a curious old fellow, who is a red-hot politician. In three minutes he let loose a flood of his political opinions upon me, and incidentally wedged in the fact that his wife and daughter are at the theatre, and that he hopes they will get back safely, despite the fog. A counter runs along the length of the shop and along the farther end. It lifts up at the end—for I saw the hinges—and but a step divides it from a cozy little parlor, where I noticed a supper laid. A door turns out of that parlor, which clearly leads through to the staircase of the house. Now, I want you to get through the shop, lift up the flap in the counter at the end, get into the parlor, through it onto the stairs, sprint up to the top of the house, find the front attic—for all the houses in this row are built in just the same way—get through the window onto the tiles, run along by the parapet from house to house until you reach Number Seventy-seven, force a way through the attic window there, run downstairs, and finally let me and Pedro in."

"Is that all?" said Checkers.

"This is no time for irony. Follow me!"

"But supposing I am caught in the tobacconist's house?"

"The old fellow is alone. He told me so."

"But how am I to get through the shop without his seeing me?"

"I am going to make that quite simple. You will wait close by the door, and when you hear a sound of confusion you will dodge in, keeping low, and I promise that you will not be observed. Here we are."

Gordon Keith stepped boldly into the shop. At the same moment a little man, with an abundance of untidy hair, appeared behind the counter on the right. This counter was piled at one end, almost to the roof, with boxes of cigars, tins of tobacco, and boxes of cigarettes.

At once Keith shouted, in a loud voice:

"But there is one thing which you forget, sir, when you talk such nonsense about the State and large incomes. I was reading this morning an article in the *Express Observer*—"

"Balderdash and piffle, sir!" roared the shopowner, break-

ing in angrily. "If you have come here to quote from that lying rag—"

"I only wish to drive home the palpable fact—"

"And I refuse to listen to arguments that emanate from such—"

"But as a sensible man I would—"

"I call no man sensible who—"

"But if you are a gentleman, as I beg leave to doubt—"

"If you come here to insult—"

"I tell you that I have before me a whole weight of evidence which cannot fail to overwhelm you with—"

At this point Keith, leaning forward in apparent uncontrollable excitement, brought down the entire mass of goods upon the counter. With an appalling crash the column heaved over and fell upon the agonized shopkeeper, who collapsed, and was instantly buried beneath the ruins.

Checkers needed no other cue. He darted through the shop, into the little parlor, through the door, and up the stairway before Keith could have counted twenty.

At the second attempt Checkers discovered the attic at the top of the house. To pass through the window onto the leads was an easy task.

Letting himself slide down, he was stopped by the low parapet. There was not the least danger of his being seen from the street, for the fog surged round him in damp, penetrating folds. The voices of the tobacconist and the detective came up faintly to Checkers' ears—Keith speaking in soothing, apologetic tones, and the other storming with rage.

Checkers passed on to the roof of the adjoining house, thence to the next, from that to the third, and then suddenly put out his right foot into empty air. It was touch and go, for Checkers regained his balance only by a writhing movement of his body which a contortionist might have regarded with envy.

Clearly there was a division between this house and the fourth. Checkers had not noticed that these two were semi-detached. Gordon Keith had perceived the fact, but he had kept quiet, for the space between was no wider than seven or eight feet, which was an easy jump. Easy, indeed, in ordinary circumstances, but at the present moment Checkers could not see six inches before him.

He drew back, his forehead damp with the peril of his narrow escape. The fog rolled round him in dense masses. He heard the midnight roar of the West End, and saw a dingy haze where the lights of some great thoroughfare penetrated into the mist.

It was an anxious moment. He would not have hesitated to jump, but there were two reasons which made him pause—the fog utterly concealed his landing place, and he had no idea how wide the gulf was.

"This is a nice pickle! What on earth am I to do?" groaned Checkers.

He was between the devil and the deep sea. He dared not go forward, and it was still more certain that he could not return.

A minute passed, and each moment was precious. Checkers leaned over the parapet and called down huskily:

"S-sh!! S-sh!"

There was no reply. Gordon Keith had, of course, gone on to the house which he meant to enter, and so did not hear Checkers.

"I've got to chance the jump; there is no help for it!" groaned Checkers.

He buttoned his coat, jammed his hat firmly on his head, and, with his courage sinking into his boots, prepared to launch himself into the gray void. He was on the roof of a four-story house, and if he missed his hold Gordon Keith would have to look for a new assistant.

Clinching his teeth, Checkers hurled himself into empty air. In the very act of jumping his left foot slipped, his leg bent under him, and in that agonized moment he realized that his leap had been robbed of half its impetus.

His forward movement came to a swift stop, and, sure



enough, his feet did not touch the adjoining roof! He felt himself falling. A shrill scream of terror broke from his lips.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS.

With wildly groping fingers poor Checkers clutched at the air, and suddenly he felt that frantic grip stiffen upon something which held. He had caught hold of a leaden gutter that ran along that side of the house. From it he hung, suspended sixty feet above the stones, with just enough strength left to hold on, for the shock of fear had unnerved him.

Then, with an effort, he pulled himself together, put forth all his remaining energy, and found himself safe and sound upon the roof. He would have liked to have sat down upon the parapet for a breathing space, but he knew that Keith must by that time be anxiously awaiting his appearance. So he continued his journey, came down to the attic window of No. 77, easily forced the weak bolt, and was in the mysterious house.

With heart beating hard, Checkers made his way down the stairs, which were in utter darkness. The hall door was unbolted, and rarely had Gordon Keith's face seemed so welcome as when Checkers perceived the detective waiting for him.

"You were a long time," said Keith.

"It—it's a miracle I am here at all," answered Checkers indignantly.

"But you will not be here long," consoled Keith. He closed the door, struck a match, which he applied to a fragment of candle, and, holding his revolver in his right hand, commenced to ascend the stairs, followed by Checkers and the bloodhound.

"You are sure that the cry you heard came from the upper part of the house?" whispered Keith.

"Absolutely certain."

"Then we will begin at the top." With these words the detective opened one door, which disclosed a bedroom that had no occupant. He passed on to the next door, and found it locked. He rapped softly upon the wood with his knuckles, then sharply.

He was answered by a faint, muffled cry.

He applied his shoulder to the door, but it resisted.

"Both together! We have got to break in," he said to Checkers.

Both pitted their united strength against the portal, while even Pedro, perceiving what was wanted, butted his enormous head against the obstacle. It yielded, breaking in with a crash, and Gordon Keith stepped over the threshold.

There was no need for his candle end, for the room was lighted by a hand lamp that stood upon a table. There was no window to this room, and another doorway faced the one by which the intruders entered. A young girl, who had been lying on a sofa, started to a sitting posture as Keith and Checkers rushed into the apartment. She could do no more, for her hands and feet were strongly secured with fine cord.

Gordon Keith gave one look, then stopped, astounded.

"Verna Willoughby!" he cried. "Is it possible?"

The next instant and he was slashing at the cord with his pocketknife.

"Take me away! Take me away!" moaned the girl, who was deathly pale.

"I thought you had escaped?" answered Keith, vigorously rubbing her hands to restore circulation, for the cord had been secured with cruel tightness.

"So I did; but I was followed and brought back in a fainting condition," answered Verna. "Take me out of this house quickly. It is a terrible place, and we shall be murdered if—"

"Hark!" cried Checkers suddenly.

The bloodhound uttered a menacing snarl, and its hair bristled with fury.

"I did not bolt the door downstairs," said Keith swiftly. "We shall pay dearly for that fool's mistake."

There was the sound of a door slamming below. Verna clasped her hands, and seemed about to lose consciousness. Keith seized her almost roughly.

"Everything depends on your pluck," he cried. "We must escape through this other door." And he rushed to open it.

As he did so, and his hand drove it backward, the bloodhound leaped at him, and closed its fangs upon his coat. The action saved Gordon Keith from instant death. For the door was a blind that covered a deadly trap. It swung back upon vacancy, upon an empty pit that yawned at the detective's feet, and out of which came rolling the gray fog.

"Ah, ah!" said the detective, fetching his breath in a sudden gasp. "Well done, Pedro, old fellow." He was absolutely calm, as he always was when threatened by imminent danger. Checkers, who had been listening at the doorway, whispered hoarsely:

"There are a lot of them muttering below. I think they suspect that we are here."

"They shall have good proof of it," said Keith grimly.

"Checkers, I leave this lady to your charge. We cannot hope to escape by the ordinary way. Drag that tablecloth from the table and cut it into strips. Secure one end to the handle of that other door, and drop the other out. You descend first, and if all is well you call to Miss Willoughby to follow."

Checkers needed no command to hasten. Before Keith had finished speaking he was preparing the extempore rope.

"As for me," said Keith, "I must hold those villains back for a while. Ah, this will help me!"

He had caught sight of a long, ivory-handled stiletto lying upon the carpet in a corner of the room. He snatched it up, placed the blade between his teeth, caught up his revolver in one hand, the lamp in the other, and passed out onto the landing, placing the lamp just outside the door so that Checkers had some light to work by. Then he stepped to the head of the stairs and waited.

From the basement of the house floated a murmur of men whispering together. Gordon Keith listened intently.

"Five or six of them," he said to himself. "And if, as I am inclined to think, this is one of the secret murder holes of London, I shall have to fight hard for my life."

The whispering ceased, and a silence followed. Suddenly a stair creaked, and a voice said "Sh!"

At that moment the bloodhound, waiting at Keith's side, its huge muscles a-quiver with excitement, uttered a snarl which resembled a growl of thunder.

A curse sounded, and a voice asked fiercely: "What did I tell you?" At the same instant a man came bounding up the stairs, two steps at a time.

"Be careful," called Keith loudly. "There is a danger in coming upstairs too quickly."

The fellow recoiled, stepping back upon the toes of a comrade who was just behind him. Four other men came running up, and the six of them stopped in a crowd at the foot of the twelve wooden stairs that formed the final flight. At the top of those stairs stood Gordon Keith, a revolver in one hand, a gleaming weapon in the other, and by his side the fear-inspiring form of the bloodhound, which was only waiting its master's command to launch itself upon its enemies.

"I do not advise you to come one step farther," said the detective calmly. "Pardon me for detaining you a few minutes, but it is absolutely necessary."

The calm, mocking tone of the detective had its effect. The men whispered among themselves. Keith heard Checkers working feverishly at the means of descent, and he knew that every second gained meant the difference between life



and death. He observed, with considerable relief, that his enemies did not carry revolvers, though he suspected that not one of them was without an equally murderous and more silent weapon.

Suddenly one spoke. "We warn you against the danger of interfering with us," he cried. "You are at perfect liberty to retire, if you go at once, and alone. Refuse, and you will never leave this house alive."

"I have my own opinion about that," answered Gordon Keith. "There are as many of you as there are bullets in this revolver, and I shall not fire at the same man twice if I can help it. Then my dog here is particularly anxious to come to close quarters. Consider, my friends, I shall not sell my life cheaply, be assured."

"Once more—will you go?" cried the speaker for the others.

"In my own time—yes."

"Fool! Then take that!"

A heavy-handed knife came hurtling straight at Keith's heart. Thrown with unerring skill, and with terrific force, it would have buried itself in the detective's breast had he not leaped aside with an agility that only just saved him. Uttering a curse, the thrower leaped up the last flight of stairs. At the same instant Keith pulled the trigger. The revolver missed fire!

"Ah, now we have won!" cried the other.

"Not yet," answered Keith. And he flung the weapon full in the face of the man, who reeled back, lost his balance, and crashed heavily down the stairs, upsetting two men who were running up abreast. At the same moment the bloodhound, breaking from all restraint, hurled its huge body downward, and crashed full upon another. The fellow uttered an appalling yell of terror.

Checkers' ears rang with the sound of the combat, but he dared not stop to take part in it. Keith was fighting against deadly odds, and the sweat of fear as well as toil rolled down the lad's face as he tore the heavy tablecloth into strips and knotted each together. At any instant he expected to see the rascals come rushing through the open doorway. At length he finished his task, secured the extempore rope as he had been directed. Then, risking a couple of seconds, he rushed to see if the detective needed his help.

Gordon Keith's enemies had returned to the attack. One had run upon him, and aimed a furious thrust, which Keith barely avoided. Dropping his weapon, the detective suddenly seized the man by the throat with such force that the fellow's arms instantly relaxed and his body grew limp. Exerting all his strength, Keith lifted him, and threw him upon his companions. But it was an effort which left him nearly exhausted.

"Ready!" shouted Checkers.

"Go, then!" shouted Keith.

He called to the dog, who came limping to his side. Two men bounded up to renew the attack. Seizing the lighted lamp, the detective hurled it at them, then turned and dashed into the room, the bloodhound at his heels. He slammed to the door, gripped the heavy sofa, and dragged it across the only means of entrance. The lighted lamp had shattered to fragments, and burning oil was running in all directions. It gave Keith the few precious seconds he needed, for in that time he had seized all the furniture in the room and piled it up against the closed door.

Then he looked round. Through the doorway on the farther side of the room a nebulous light entered with the chilling night air. It showed Keith that Checkers and the girl had disappeared. Only he and Pedro were left. He strode over, and peered down into the gulf, but could see nothing save the gray folds of fog struggling to enter the warmer air of the room.

"All right, gov'nor!" came floating up the voice of Checkers.

At the same moment heavy crashes upon the barricaded door threatened to drive it in.

Gordon Keith turned to the dog.

"You must jump, old fellow," said he.

The great hound put its nose over the brink of the pit, crouching back upon its haunches, and shivering with fear. Then it looked into its master's face, and uttered a lugubrious howl.

"Jump, Pedro!" cried Keith sternly.

He realized how harsh was the order, and that instinct warned the bloodhound that the leap was too much for it. Yet what other course was open? Fatigued as he was by the fight, the detective was utterly incapable of taking the dog down with him.

With a splintering crash a panel of the door was driven in.

Something like a groan broke from Gordon Keith as he perceived that he had got to leave Pedro to his fate. It was not the first time that he had been compelled to leave the hound, and, though Pedro had always contrived to escape uninjured on his own account, yet now there seemed no earthly chance of his doing so.

Keith swung himself out into the abyss, gripping the rope. A mournful cry from Pedro told of the dog's wretchedness. Hand over hand Gordon Keith went down, until he no longer felt the rope between his legs.

"Let yourself go; it's a safe drop!" cried Checkers from below.

The detective relaxed his hold. His feet had scarcely touched ground when sounds of commotion from above told that the men had broken into the room. Cries of rage floated downward through the fog. They were interrupted with startling abruptness by a frenzied yell that was choked off instantly.

"Ah, Pedro has got one!" said Keith.

The words were no sooner expressed than, with a terrible impact, something struck the stones of the paved yard in which they were standing. Keith darted forward. He saw a man lying upon his face, and at the same instant felt his hand being licked by a rough tongue. He at once perceived what had happened. Locked in a deadly grip, man and dog had pitched out, and fallen almost the entire height of the house. Fortunately for Pedro, his body had been uppermost, and he had apparently escaped without injury.

Gordon Keith waited to learn no more. Checkers had already discovered a gate at the end of the yard, which led into a private, narrow passage, and this, in turn, into a public thoroughfare.

## CHAPTER V.

### GORDON KEITH AT FAULT.

Verna Willoughby's story, as she told it to Gordon Keith before that night was passed, was a short one. She concealed nothing. She had been drawn into playing bridge, for high stakes at Lady Greenacre's card parties, had met the Marquis d'Ajuda there, and he had professed to have fallen in love with her. She owed him, and others, large sums of money.

"I was returning home alone from Lady Greenacres," she said. "You know my father, Mr. Keith, and you know that he is not a rich man. I eke out his allowance by teaching music. Lady Greenacres professes to be a friend of my father's and invites me to her parties. On the night in question I had not even money to pay a cab fare. My way was by that terrible house in Smoke Street. I only remember that a man was standing by the curb begging. No sooner had I passed him than something told me he meant harm; but before I could turn round I felt his arm round me, and a handkerchief soaked with chloroform being pressed against my lips. I awoke to find myself in that



house from which you saved me. I was not treated badly there, though every minute was one of terror."

She stopped, as though that was the end of her story, while she looked at Gordon Keith with a pale, troubled face.

"Miss Willoughby," said the detective gravely, "you must be aware of the reason of your detention. Those men are some of the villainous friends of the equally villainous Marquis d'Ajuda. He is responsible for the affair, and his intention it was to wed you there—by force. Fortunately—very fortunately for yourself—something must have happened to keep him from turning up in time. Instead of him, however, another came, and you and he were compelled to go through the marriage ceremony, which, of course, was quite a farce under the circumstances."

"How did you know that?" said Verna, in a tense voice.

"You did not mean to tell me about that?"

"I had not made up my mind."

"You knew that this other man was not the marquis?"

"Oh, yes, I knew that. He was masked, but his voice told me who he was."

"What! You were acquainted with him—with this Miles Oldershaw?"

"Why, how do you know even his name?" cried Verna, astonished.

Keith glanced at Checkers.

"You see," he whispered, "the marquis told the truth. His story was fact."

He turned to Verna.

"Who is Miles Oldershaw?" he asked. "Tell me the truth, for I am perfectly convinced that both you and he are enveloped in a web of danger and conspiracy."

"Miles was once engaged to me," answered Verna, in a low voice, her eyes upon the carpet. "He did not approve of my going to Lady Greenacres' bridge parties, and, after a quarrel, the engagement was broken off. It was entirely my fault. He disappeared soon after. I had not seen him for six weeks, and—"

"Six weeks!" cried Gordon Keith. And he got up and commenced to walk about, evidently much excited.

"You may guess how greatly astonished I was when he came into the room where those men were to marry me to the Marquis d'Ajuda," continued the girl. "Of course, he must have followed me from Lady Greenacres', and got into the house."

"Undoubtedly," acquiesced Keith. "He would have done better to have called the police. However, I am glad he did not. Go on."

"The men did not suspect him, and you may be sure I did not show any surprise. He got me out of the house afterward. The others let us go, but they must have suspected something, for I know now that we were followed. Miles evidently did not think I had recognized him in his mask, for he maintained an absolute silence while we walked away quickly from the house, and at the corner he left me in a most abrupt manner. Would to Heaven he had remained with me a little longer. I had been followed. I was attacked in the fog and taken back. They left me alone in the room where you found me. The Marquis d'Ajuda arrived soon after, for I heard him shouting in the room below angrily. He wanted the priest to repeat the marriage ceremony, but the man had conscience enough to refuse. Then I distinctly heard Miles' name mentioned, and I concluded that he, too, had been followed and identified."

"True enough," said Blake. "An extraordinary story, Miss Willoughby, which, if you told it to others, might not be credited. But I know London, with its houses of mystery, of crime, of the strangest conspiracies, and I believe all you have told me. And now I am going to ask you one or two questions. Who is Miles Oldershaw, who so cruelly left you after he had imperiled his life for your sake?"

"He is a gentleman of independent means; three years

older than I. He has—or had—rooms quite near to where we are, in the Marylebone Road."

"So much I happen to know. Thank you. Is that all you can tell me about him?"

"He—he was very fond of experiments in chemicals," said Verna, in a well-nigh breaking voice. "His hobby was explosives."

"Ah! Of course, he was known to the Marquis d'Ajuda?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Have you the faintest idea where Miles Oldershaw vanished to during those six weeks you spoke of after the unfortunate breaking off of your engagement?"

Verna shook her head.

"He wrote to me once," she answered. "The only address on the notepaper were the words 'Rat Hall.'"

Keith lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

"But the postmark on the envelope?" he asked swiftly.

"Deadwater."

"A sinister sort of address. And you did not trouble to find out where that was?"

"His letter was one of final farewell," said Verna, a catch in her voice.

For five minutes Gordon Keith remained plunged in thought. Suddenly he said:

"My friend Checkers will see you safely to your home. You live alone, I presume? Yes, yes. In the meantime, Miss Willoughby, I shall get to work upon this case."

"To work!" echoed the girl, obviously surprised. "What more remains? You have saved me, and—"

"Everything remains," interrupted Keith calmly. "You have no idea of the really desperate conspiracy that is being woven round— But I will be silent for the present. And now, my dear young lady, before you go I want you to give me the promise that you withheld from the man you loved. Leave bridge alone."

The girl's face flamed crimson.

"I promise," she answered simply.

"Thank you," said Gordon Keith.

When Checkers returned he found the detective buried in his armchair, and the room almost opaque with tobacco smoke.

"Checkers," said Gordon, "I have looked at this extraordinary affair from precisely thirteen points of view, and can make nothing of it. I have, since your absence, formed eight totally different theories, and rejected each. I am anxious to hear what you have to advise."

"My advice, gov'nor, is that you inform the police concerning Number Seventy-seven, Smoke Street, and have D'Ajuda arrested and punished."

"Punished he would be, Checkers—and the law can have him and welcome, after I have finished with him. But if one thing is clear to me, it is that we have seen happen only the first part of what I feel is going to prove one of my most enthralling experiences. Our friend D'Ajuda is in love with Verna Willoughby, that is certain; but his game goes much deeper than that. What it is I cannot imagine. There is a question which puzzles me greatly. It is, why did D'Ajuda play that extraordinary trick upon me of coming here as Miles Oldershaw? At first I rather thought that he wanted me to trace the girl of his story, but we have learned since that she was not lost sight of—in fact, was a prisoner in the house. Yet he comes to me—puts his head, as it were, into the lion's jaws. Strange! Certainly he did not reckon on my going to that house in Smoke Street. He told me that the girl had escaped. My going there must have considerably disturbed his plans. By this time, I doubt not, he knows me for an enemy, and— Ah, you have something to suggest?"

"This, gov'nor. D'Ajuda was jealous of Oldershaw. We know he isn't a man to stick at a crime. Oldershaw suddenly disappeared, as Miss Willoughby told us. A suspicion that he has met with foul play might arise, but the marquis

*Upon Blake, this story is evidently a real story rewritten for Gordon Keith*



meant you to be a witness, by calling on you as Oldershaw, that the missing man is alive."

"I would say that you argue well, Checkers, if your conclusions were not wretchedly poor," chuckled Keith. "In the first place, D'Ajuda is far too clever a scoundrel to hope that such a ruse would succeed; and in the second place, did not Miss Willoughby inform us that her one-time fiancé actually did show himself in the house from which we have only just escaped with whole skins? Oldershaw, after a long absence, appears in that dramatic fashion, and as dramatically disappears—for I shall certainly not find him when we call at his lodgings to-morrow morning. That is to be our next move, though I have little hopes of picking up one of the loose ends of this thread there."

Though it was clear to Checkers that Gordon Keith was intensely interested in the case, yet he did not share his enthusiasm, and it was with a sense of reaction after the recent excitement that he accompanied the famous detective early next morning to Miles Oldershaw's rooms in the Marylebone Road. With barely a feeling of surprise, he heard Keith accost the landlady in friendly terms, and shake her cordially by the hand. He scarcely listened as the detective explained that he had once been of assistance to her husband—an inland revenue man—in a case regarding the theft of a government seal. The woman gladly acceded to Gordon Keith's request to visit her tenant's rooms.

"Most of Mr. Oldershaw's things are there as he left them, sir," she said. "I have been a bit worried about him, for he went off so sudden. He was a nice young fellow, he was, though he always made me nervous with his chemical experiments—for many a time I feared he would blow the house up. This is the room he used for what he called his laboratory. I do hope he hasn't got into serious mischief, sir, seeing as you are here concerning him?"

"I trust not," answered Keith. "In any case, I am here as his friend."

This reply reassured the landlady, who withdrew and left Keith and Checkers in the laboratory. The room had once been a basement kitchen. Its closed windows looked onto a strip of back yard. The walls were covered with shelves, on which were variously shaped bottles, mostly containing liquids, and all labeled. A cracked earthenware melting pot had been flung into the grate. The kitchen dresser had not been removed, and the tenant had clearly found it of use, for one of its drawers was open, disclosing a quantity of loose papers. A bare deal table was in the centre of the room, and a bottle, shattered to fragments, lay on the linoleum-covered stones close to it.

Gordon Keith took all this in at a glance. Suddenly, somewhat to Checkers' surprise, he said in a loud voice:

"A lot of rubbish! It is time the place was cleaned! Look at that smashed glass upon the floor! Mrs. Milton must be an untidy woman not to get to work with a broom."

Having uttered this complaint, Keith gripped Checkers roughly by a shoulder.

"Stand where you are, and don't move on any account!" he whispered.

Still talking in a disgusted tone of voice, Keith commenced to wander round the laboratory, but Checkers perceived that the detective was acting under a strong excitement. He glanced down at the broken glass, dropped upon one knee, remained in that position for half a minute, rose, and began to peer intently at the rough, stained surface of the deal table.

"I should say that Mrs. Milton is well rid of her lodger!" he cried. "A lot of nasty stuff about the place!" But as Keith spoke he snatched a pocket lens from his coat and leaned over the table, examining something with extraordinary interest. When he stood upright, the wondering Checkers saw the detective's eyes flash with triumph.

"I shall advise Mrs. Milton to tell the dustman to cart this lot of evil stuff away!" he said loudly, and commenced to inspect the labels on the bottles—at the same time, he

wrote their inscriptions in his pocketbook with great swiftness, talking most of the while. "Heaven knows what's in these bottles!" he cried. "Poison, I shouldn't be surprised! Ugh! That fellow Oldershaw had a queer taste!"

Utterly unable to form the least idea of what Gordon Keith was driving at, Checkers watched him, getting very much excited without at all knowing why. Keith quitted his examination of the labels, and moved to the dresser drawers. He commenced to turn the papers over.

"A lot of rubbish here!" he said scoffingly. "Old journals, treatises on organic and inorganic chemistry! A written paper on the elements of well-known blasting compounds! If I were Mrs. Milton, I should certainly give such a tenant a quarter's notice!"

As he spoke, Keith caught at an envelope among the papers, drew out a letter from inside it, glanced through it, then thrust it into his pocket. When he turned to Checkers, his eyes were dancing with excitement.

"Come along, my lad," he cried; "we are wasting our time here!" And he drew the amazed Checkers out of the room.

Gordon Keith walked away from the house with long strides that showed how keenly his mind was working. Checkers at last ventured a question.

"You have found something, guv'nor?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the great detective. "I have discovered that it is much safer to be on dry ground than in an air ship."

Checkers stared. Was this to be one of the occasions when he came to fear that long and intense application to some baffling problem was having a baleful effect on Gordon Keith's brain?

"I have also decided," chuckled Keith, watching Checkers' alarmed face out of the corner of his right eye, "that it is advisable for me to go to Lady Greenacres' bridge party to-night."

"You!" gasped Checkers. "After—after what you said about them, and her?"

"Yes," replied the detective calmly. "And I shall have to play bridge well unless I want to lose heavily! In fact, I shall probably be obliged to fall back upon one or two little tricks in the game, which I have learned from card sharpers. In reality, however, my object in playing bridge for high stakes is that I may have a good opportunity of observing the second finger of the left hand of the Marquis d'Ajuda!"

"There is something in the wind!" said Checkers, half to himself. Aloud he asked: "I shall be your partner?"

"Certainly not," replied Keith. "In the first place, you play bridge abominably badly, Checkers—and in the second, you must catch the first train that will take you to Deadwater, when we have found out where that place is. You will then find Rat Hall, and, without attempting to get inside it, you will nevertheless watch the place and take careful note of anything unusual that you see or hear. Pedro goes with you, for you may well have need of him."

## CHAPTER VI.

### A FRIGHTFUL APPARITION.

An hour later Checkers left King's Cross railway station, northward bound. His one fellow traveler in the compartment was a lady, heavily and warmly clad for the long journey. She did not glance at Checkers on entering, nor during the run.

The journey was utterly uneventful, and Checkers had nothing to occupy his thoughts save the case on which he was engaged. He wished that Gordon Keith had been a little more communicative. His mysterious mention of air ships, and the second finger of the marquis' left hand, did



not tell Checkers much, and he soon tired of building theories upon it.

On arriving at his destination, he set about his task of finding Rat Hall. Inquiries for such a place only drew smiles from all he questioned. He began to despair, and darkness settling down, he was obliged to put up at an inn—the Three Suns. Here, to his joy, a chance mention of Rat Hall to the landlord gave him the information he sought.

"You must mean the old manor house in Marshmould Glen, the place that's been empty since two Christmases ago," said the proprietor of the Three Suns. "Come I now to think of it, I have heard it called by that name. I remember it when Squire Oldershaw lived there with his pack of yellow mastiffs that were the terror o' the countryside. They was afeard of nothing in heaven or earth, them dogs, save the old man. Fed 'em on raw meat, he did. And he was fiercer than his tigers, you can take my word. Lor', you wouldn't find another man to live in the manor. It's three centuries old, and not a paneled room in it that hasn't a story of some crime. Tales that 'ud lift your hair to hear 'em. Now, there's Sam Jenkins, the old squire's gardener—you can hear his voice in the bar parlor now. You go to him, sir, and Sam'll tell you tales of that accursed house in the Glen that make you sweat cold drops, keep you awake o' nights for a week, give you the trembles for days, and help to turn your hair gray. Go and try him."

Checkers declined this treat.

"I suppose they call the old manor house Rat Hall because of the rats?" he questioned.

"There you've hit it, sir. Rats? Swarms of 'em. The big underground kitchens and cellars ain't safe places for a man to go in, not even in daylight. When Rat Hall is pulled down, you won't find me near."

Checkers thanked his informant, and decided to make a tour round the outside of the house that night, for a full moon was flooding the countryside with light. He went downstairs soon after his interview with the landlord, and was passing the bar parlor, when a cracked and wheezy voice called to him through the open doorway.

"If you be t' young gentleman what landlord was tellin' us about, tak' my advice, sir, an' keep clear of t' old manor to-night."

A hum of approval went round from the party gathered in the parlor.

"You are Mr. Sam Jenkins, I suppose?" answered Checkers, eager to learn all he could concerning the place that Gordon Keith had sent him to watch.

"Ye suppose right, sir. What business, might I ask, have you at t' old house in the Glen?"

"Only that I am told it's worth a visit."

"Tain't. I was gardener there in squire's day. Forty years I knew him, the wickedest man these old eyes ever looked on. Mebbe ye don't know, sir, that hedied this night precisely seven year ago?"

"I didn't know it."

"Nor, maybe, the manner of his death?"

Checkers shook his head.

"Tell him, Sam," said one of the company.

Sam finished his mug of ale, and loaded his clay pipe with a thoughtful air.

"It came about a month after squire brought home his third wife," said he. "Brought her from Spain, did he. Twenty year younger than 'im, beautiful as a rose, and with a temper sich as I never seed in woman born. They said she was an opera dancer, or something like thet. 'Owsomever, she didn't take at all kindly like to the rotting old manor and the rats. Oh, no!

"They hadn't been married a month afore the quarrels began. Rows? I've 'ad some stiff scenes with my ole Matilda, an' you, gentlemen all, 'ave known what it is to have an upset with your wives; but you an' them never yet looked

into each other's eyes the way those two used to look when they was mad. She was a tigress, an' thet's a fact.

"One night, this very night seven year ago, I was sitting in my room top of t' house—I would never go near the basement on 'count of the rats—when I heard sich a scream that seemed to turn my blood first to ice, and then to burning fire. Downstairs I rushed. The sounds came from the dining room on the first floor. I tried the door, but it was locked, and the louder I knockel the more terrible grew the screams. A bit of a terrace runs round the dining room, an' I bolted from the house an' made my way to the long glass doors. I smashed a window, and got through, cutting myself pretty bad. A red curtain was in front of the window. I brushed it aside, an' what I saw I shall never get out o' these old eyes.

"Squire's wife was standing at one end of the room, fixed with fear, so that she could no more than scream an' scream. A lamp lay shivered upon the floor, an' whether she had thrown it or not, it ain't fer me to say, but squire was in flames from top to toe. Ye must know that the room was hung with crimson tapestry, the chairs covered with red, the ceiling paneled in red wood—everything red; and I remember the red glare of the flames as being particular dreadful. Squire he ran to me with a groan of 'Save me, Sam!' I whipped off the red cover from the table, and rolled him in it; the scars are on my hands an' arms now. But I was much too late, and t' old man never saw another sunrise."

"And his wife?" asked Checkers, not very much interested in the tale.

"She must have run out while I was 'tending to squire, for I never heard of any mortal eyes seeing her again. But one thing I do know, which is that she is dead."

The narrator paused, waiting for the inevitable question which he always expected at this point of his tale.

"How do you know that she is dead, Sam?" asked a listener.

"How do I know that? Because on this evening, each twelvemonth, ye can see t' old squire fer yerselves, blazing from head to foot in red fire, and hear his wife screaming like a thousand furies let loose."

Checkers shrugged his shoulders and left the inn.

Almost at once he found himself on a stretch of moorland over which the night wind whistled with a piercing keenness. The livid face of a half-frozen pool seemed to look at him from its rim-encircled bed of sedge grass. The hour was late, and the moor absolutely deserted.

Suddenly Checkers gave a cry, and staggered back. Then he forced a laugh, as he watched the immense white owl, half blinded by the moonlight, that had almost struck him in the face. He paused, and looked back in the direction of the inn.

A rosy light showed where the blinds covered the windows. It looked very cozy in there, and this opinion was evidently shared by Pedro, for he started to return, looking at Checkers' face for consent.

"No, no, old fellow. We must have a look at Rat Hall before turning in," cried Checkers.

Following the directions he had received, he soon found that the path was becoming a declivity, and that on either hand the ground was steadily rising. As he pushed on, banks rose to right and left covered with bushes, and later, farther ahead, with trees. The moonlight was presently blotted out by these enormous trees, whose black and withered arms swayed in the night wind, and from which a harsh and continuous roar proceeded.

Checkers shivered without knowing why. The sharp walk had warmed his blood, but he had a sensation that danger of some sort lurked in the quiet night. The dog also appeared to be conscious of something amiss, for it trotted close to Checkers' legs, while now and again it would stop and sniff the air.

"The yarn of that old reprobate of a squire has got on



our nerves, Pedro," said Checkers. "Thunder and lightning, how dark it is getting in this dismal glen!"

The towering banks, which had now become almost cliffs, shut out the light, so that it was impossible to see more than half a dozen yards ahead. The dog showed signs of increasing uneasiness, and once it cowered low and gave vent to a long and mournful howl.

"Silence, Pedro!" said Checkers, though he felt his blood run cold. The bloodhound never uttered that sound without good reason. Checkers was sorely tempted to turn back, but the very fact that something unusual was in the atmosphere urged him to continue forward.

Suddenly his progress was stopped by a high brick wall. The climbing moon, which had now almost reached the zenith, flung a slanting ray through the tops of the trees on one of the banks, and this shaft of light showed Checkers that he had come to what could be no other than the old manor house. He could not see the wall, but it felt horribly wet and slimy to his touch. Following it round, he came to two huge stone piers on either side of a high iron gateway. Peering through the gate, he could see a courtyard, its stones covered with a green growth and grass-grown between the crevices. Beyond this courtway he perceived, partly illumined by the moon, the gables and chimneys of Rat Hall.

Pedro crouched before the gate, shivering. There was a wicket in the gateway, but upon trying it Checkers found it to be bolted on the inside. But the boy's spirit of adventure had been thoroughly roused. A second later he had scrambled over the gate, and, pulling back the heavy bolt, flung it open. But for once Pedro refused to follow his young master. Neither threat nor soft words would persuade the great bloodhound to pass into the sombre, shadow-filled grounds belonging to the old manor.

With a heart beating considerably faster than usual, Checkers crossed the yard. He turned abruptly to see if Pedro had changed his mind, and he was almost sure that he perceived a tall figure dart swiftly from the path of moonlight into black shadow, but without making the least sound. Directly after the bloodhound again raised its voice in a melancholy cry.

For a second Checkers felt a wild panic, which prompted him to dash across the courtyard for the wicket, and bolt down the glen for his very life. He resisted it; but fully three minutes passed before he summoned up sufficient courage to proceed.

His feet struck against a high slope of coarse grass which seemed to extend along one side of the house. Telling himself that it was probably the terrace which the old gardener had spoken of, Checkers climbed it. Almost immediately he found himself stopped by a pair of French windows.

"They must be the windows of the dining room which Sam Jenkins mentioned," he thought.

He pressed his nose against the cold panes, but the interior of the room was in darkness, and he could discern nothing.

"If the ghost of the old squire means to appear to-night, now is his time," muttered Checkers.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when the blackness of the room was rent by an appalling red flash. It lasted for three seconds. As Checkers' starting eyeballs beheld the glare, he saw with the utmost distinctness the figure of a man in the centre of that lurid flame.

As Checkers reeled back, covering his eyes to shut out the appalling sight, a piercing scream, repeated again and again, rang in his ears with terrible iteration, and almost made his heart stop.

For a few brief moments fear turned Checkers to the rigidity of stone; then he leaped backward, fell down the grass slope, rolled over and over, scrambled to his feet, rushed across the courtyard, sprang through the open wicket, and ran as if death were grasping at his heels.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE POISONED CARD.

Lady Greenacres' bridge parties always commenced early and left off late. When Gordon Keith arrived, dinner was just over, and play almost about to begin. He found the saloon well crowded, and pressed his way forward to find his hostess.

"Ah! so at last you have become a convert to the game of games!" said the venerable Lady Greenacres, tapping the detective with her fan in a girlishly playful manner.

"I never objected to it," replied Keith. "But high stakes, Lady Greenacres, are good neither for the game nor the nerves."

"I hope you have not come to my rooms to-night intending to play for fivepence a hundred points."

"Pardon; I will play for five thousand pounds a hundred, if you wish."

"You are not serious?"

"Oh, but I am!"

"Why, then, this violent overturning of your principles?"

"I feel as if I could play bridge to-night, that is all."

"You mean you feel that you will win?"

"I am assured of it."

"So that is why you will accept high stakes—because you have no fear of losing?"

"A nasty thrust, Lady Greenacres," answered Gordon Keith, with a laugh. "Let us say that it is true."

Lady Greenacres looked darkly at her guest.

"You were always an enigma, Mr. Keith," she said. "When you seem to be in deadly earnest, you are often but jesting; and when you laugh, as you do now, then Heaven help some one from your grasp."

"You pay me a compliment. But, to be serious, I want to win some money. If you are wise you will be my partner this evening."

Lady Greenacres' eyes flashed.

"With pleasure!" she answered quickly. "Is there any one you would like to play against?"

"I suggest that we do battle with the Marquis d'Ajuda and the beautiful lady who is generally his partner."

"You mean Gabrielle Branza?"

"Exactly."

"She is not here."

Keith lifted his eyebrows.

"Indeed, they always play together," he answered. "I cannot imagine his playing without that lovely signorina."

"Still, she is not here, so the marquis must get on without her. They are great friends, and have known each other for years. When they play together they make a formidable combination."

"An absolutely irresistible one," said Keith dryly.

"You mean something by that?" was the sharp response.

"My dear Lady Greenacres, you are always suspecting that I mean things. I am not half so deep as you imagine. Of course, the combination is irresistible, for they are such perfect bridge players that they make all of us seem wretchedly poor ones. And so the beautiful signorina is not here? She has gone back to Sicily?"

"I do not think so. I was passing King's Cross Station this evening in my car, and I happened to see her alight from a taxicab and make her way to the main-line booking office."

At those words Gordon Keith started, and a momentary frown puckered his brows. The conversation was interrupted by Lady Greenacres catching hold of a tall, handsome man who was pressing by in the throng.

"Marquis," she said, "let me introduce you to Mr. Gordon Keith, who— Ah, you have met before!"

"Once or twice," said Keith composedly. "The last time, marquis, I believe, was in Berlin, in the Wilhelmstrasse, was it not?"



The other understood the allusion. He went pallid with fury, but controlled himself.

"I am afraid, monsieur, your memory is defective," said he, with calm assurance. "We met since then, unless I am mistaken."

The detective understood in his turn. The marquis was alluding to that interview when he had come to Keith as Miles Oldershaw. He was not aware that the detective had pierced through his admirable disguise almost at a glance, and he now referred to the occasion with intent to puzzle the man whom he felt was his enemy.

"Ah, but my memory is excellent, marquis!" retorted Gordon Keith, with his inscrutable smile. "Pray do not remind me."

D'Ajuda lifted his eyes and looked at Keith, as if he were trying to read his very soul; but he perceived only a mocking smile and the steady gaze which said plainer than words, "I know you for what you are, and I mean to crush you!"

"Come, gentlemen, we will begin play," interrupted Lady Greenacres. "Marquis, bring your partner to our table."

"Mr. Keith is to be my opponent?" said the marquis, in a tone the meaning of which there was no mistaking.

"If you will permit me that honor," said Keith, with a steady look that made the other tremble with rage.

"So be it," he replied.

In a few minutes every one who wanted to play was busily engaged. A general silence prevailed, broken only by the shuffling of the cards, the petulant exclamation of some disappointed lady player, the muttered grunt of an irritated male partner, the terse declaration of "Hearts," "Clubs," and so on; "Double," "Content?" "I leave it," and suchlike remarks bearing on the game. Keith and Lady Greenacres won the first rubber, their opponents the second.

At this point a slight incident occurred. The marquis had broken a new pack of cards, and was shuffling them, when Keith leaned toward him with the remark, "Pardon me; I believe one of the cards is wrong side uppermost?" At the same time, reaching out his hand, with the apparent intention of touching the card, he caught the gloved second finger of his opponent's left hand between his finger and thumb and gave it a sharp nip.

The result was curious, for the marquis dropped the whole pack of cards upon the floor, and uttered an exclamation in his native language, which the ladies, fortunately, did not understand.

"My fault," said Keith calmly. "So sorry."

D'Ajuda picked up the cards and went on shuffling. He said no word, but his hands trembled as he shot the cards round.

From that moment the luck of the cards went dead against him, or else the emotion under which he was laboring affected his play. Gordon Keith and his partner began to win heavily, and kept on winning.

"I suggest that we double the stakes," said D'Ajuda presently, and in a voice which he tried to keep steady.

Lady Greenacres looked at Keith with uplifted brows.

"By all means," said the detective.

The marquis continued to lose. His partner showed signs of considerable anxiety. It was at this point in the game that Gordon Keith, as he dealt the cards, made the singular observation:

"Luck at bridge, marquis, is about as precarious and uncertain as an air-ship voyage."

At those simple words D'Ajuda started as if he had been stung. Only Keith saw the terrible glance that he flashed at him. Then suddenly his brow cleared. He laughed easily.

"Oh, I am never beaten!" said he.

Two rounds later came the last of the rubber. It was D'Ajuda's deal. He began to shuffle the cards, but shot one halfway across the room. He started from his chair to pick it up. If Gordon Keith had not been engaged in lighting a fresh cigar, he could not have failed to notice that the

marquis appeared to have some difficulty in securing the refractory card. He returned to his seat so pale that Lady Greenacres remarked upon it.

"Bah! I am all right," he answered huskily.

Half a minute later and he had dealt the cards. As the detective sorted his different suits, getting them together, D'Ajuda watched him with an inexpressible look.

"There is almost an overpowering perfume in this room," said Lady Greenacres suddenly. "We have too many flowers."

"Or not sufficient fresh air," said the marquis. "I am not feeling very well, and if my partner offers no objection I will withdraw after this final round."

"I am quite agreeable," answered his partner, with relief, for she had lost heavily.

The game came to an end. The losers, who between them had lost nearly a thousand pounds, gave their I.O.U.'s to the winners. Gordon Keith rose, wiping one of his fingers with his handkerchief, yet not noticing his action, for his eyes were fixed upon D'Ajuda, who was crossing the room as if he were intoxicated.

"You see, I was in the winning vein, Lady Greenacres," remarked the detective.

"Ah, if you would always come to my card parties when you feel in that humor!" sighed his hostess.

Keith pressed the old woman's skinny hand, and took his departure. Outside the house he drew in a deep breath of the pure night air.

"And if I ever darken your doors, save in the way of helping one of your victims, you aged bloodsucker," he said to himself, "may I meet my ruin there, as so many have done! I have won five hundred pounds, which Verna Willoughby shall have, for part of it is her own. But I have done more than that. I know your little game for certain, my blackguardly marquis, and if I do not stop it it will be my own fault."

"Cab, sir?" called a driver.

Gordon Keith shook his head. The hour was late, the streets almost deserted, but he felt a feverishness in his blood which he thought was due to the excitement of the play. He drew the glove from his right hand, and rubbed his palm vigorously against his coat.

"It can be nothing more than a coincidence that Gabrielle Branza was at King's Cross Station this evening," he murmured. "I trust that Checkers kept his eyes open. That woman——"

He broke off, and looked at his hand by the light of a street lamp. His brows came together as he saw that the palm, the wrist, and part of the forearm were inflamed, with tiny spots of white standing vividly out against the fiery skin. At the same instant a sudden dizziness swept over Keith, so that he was obliged to catch at the standard lamp-post to save himself from falling.

Then he pulled himself together; with an effort cleared his brain and concentrated his thoughts. He recalled the strangeness of D'Ajuda's manner at the close of the play; how he had staggered from the room, white as death. He remembered the incident of the dropped card, and how the marquis had left the table to get it.

He recollected that as he—Keith—sorted his hand there had seemed to be a curious, damp stickiness on one of the cards, while a powerful perfume, which Lady Greenacres had mentioned, had floated round the table. Had D'Ajuda tampered with that particular card? Skilled in the thousand tricks of the sharper, he would have no difficulty in making it fall to his enemy.

It took Gordon Keith ten seconds to recall all this, and he passed his verdict upon the incident instantly:

"I have been poisoned through the skin!"

The terrible knowledge, which would have stupefied most men, steadied the detective's nerves. He felt a hot glow stealing along the veins of his arm, and a choked sensation



at his heart, as though it already was affected by the deadly poison which had been communicated to it.

What ought he to do? He had an immediate answer to the question. No general practitioner—or specialist, for that matter—would probably have the faintest idea of the nature of the baleful poison used by the Sicilian marquis. They would not even believe that a poison had been administered that way, or could be. His case would be diagnosed wrongly.

"And I feel that in two hours I shall be a dead man!" thought Keith.

There was but one who could help him. In more than a single case the detective had called in the aid of his friend Rufus Seraphim, whose name, before he became a slave to the opium drug, had rung through the world as the greatest specialist in poisoning cases. This man alone might perceive the truth, might know how to meet it.

But then, at most hours of the day and night, while he had two shillings to rub together, Rufus Seraphim was to be found only in some vile opium den in the Chinese quarter.

And Gordon Keith realized that he had never been nearer to death than at this moment. Again that brain-swimming dizziness attacked him, and again he fought it off.

"Where am I? Ah, in Shaftesbury Avenue!" he muttered. "Seraphim, when last I heard of him, was—Where was he? I remember—in Wardour Street, over a tailor's. I shall know the house if I see it—if I can see it."

He moved forward, kept up only by his iron will. A frightful cloud of shadow kept passing over his eyes. He reeled along with an uncertain gait, which drew upon him the eyes of a policeman. It seemed an eternity before he reached Wardour Street. A longing just to let himself go, to fall into a black, infinite abyss, was hard to resist. He could see but at intervals, and guided himself for the most part by feeling the fronts of the closed shops and darkened houses.

He found the tailor's establishment—a task which occupied a quarter of an hour, and which seemed an eon of time. An old-fashioned bell pull was at the side of the dingy doorway. He lifted a wearied arm, and strove to pull it, but had not the power. He looked feebly round, but there was neither sight nor sound of a human being.

Then he must die. There was no help for it. He was beaten. To sink down and rest—what a delicious thought! With groping hands he leaned against the doorway.

At that moment he heard, at the end of the long street, the sound of footsteps. It gave him a final flash of energy. Some one was about to pass who would ring the bell for him. Nearer and nearer came the sound, then ceased.

"Done for!" gasped Gordon Keith.

No! There was the sound again, only the footsteps were almost as unsteady as his own had been. The man, whoever he was, was drunk, would not be able to understand. Keith could just see him. He was approaching; he was alongside; he stopped.

Gordon Keith uttered an unintelligible exclamation, and, summoning all his remaining strength, he raised his right arm, and pointed to the bell.

The man came forward, stooped, and peered into the blanched face of the fainting detective. Then a cry broke from him.

"Himmel!" said the voice of Rufus Seraphim. "It is Herr Gordon Keith! My friendt—my poor friendt, what is der matter?"

But Gordon Keith was beyond the power of replying.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### WHAT THE MARQUIS FOUND.

For two days a man stood on the pavement outside Gordon Keith's rooms, and looked up at the windows and up and down the street. It might have been thought that this

man was waiting for the return of the great detective; but, if so, he certainly did not show any impatience. On the other hand, he appeared pleased.

When any one came along Baker Street bearing some resemblance to the famous crime specialist, the watcher shrank back into some shop door, and his face clouded; but when he perceived that he had made a mistake, he looked immensely relieved.

Evening of the second day approached, and the street electric lamps burst into glow, looking like enormous, lustrous pearls. It seemed to be almost a signal to the watcher, for he at once crossed the road, and made his way to that small, unpretentious house which had been visited by so many anxious hearts—hearts that beat under threadbare clothing and in the breasts of statesmen and princes.

The Marquis Raoul St. Anselm Stefano d'Ajuda muttered to himself as he dodged the traffic:

"Never again will he enter that door. I can proceed openly. I need not even have waited. When I saw him rub his palm with his handkerchief I knew that death had entered there. He crawled away somewhere to die—like a rat. The fool, to fall so easily into the trap!"

He did not inquire if Gordon Keith was in. He said, when his summons was answered by the landlady:

"Mr. Keith and I dined together. He will be here in ten minutes. He asked me to call and wait for him."

For an instant Mrs. Bardell doubted, but her visitor was a man of charming manners and perfect style. She permitted him to go upstairs, and D'Ajuda found himself in Keith's consulting room.

Instantly his manner changed. He became as sharp as a ferret, as alert as a lynx. He moved here and there with stealthy swiftness, and suddenly his eyes fell on a dozen letters which had arrived for the detective during his absence. He took up one after the other with a feverish avidity that made his cheeks burn. One was marked "Urgent." This letter the marquis at once tore open. He read inside as follows:

"I think you ought to come down here without a moment's loss of time. Rat Hall holds some terrible secret, of that I am certain. If you did not always laugh at tales of the supernatural, I would put down in this letter what I firmly believe to be a true ghost story. I will watch Marshmould Manor again to-morrow—that is its real name—and if anything unusual happens I will send another letter."

This communication was signed Checkers. The marquis turned like a flash to the postmark. As he read it, he uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"At last!" he cried.

He looked hurriedly at the rest of the addressed envelopes, but did not tamper with them, for he found no other bearing the same handwriting. He said to himself, as he prepared to leave:

"I have got what I wanted at last, and if I do not delay, I shall be in time. With that cursed meddler, Gordon Keith, effectually silenced—"

"Not effectually," said a truly unexpected voice.

D'Ajuda spun round as if a pistol ball had entered his body.

The tall, lean form of the detective was standing in the open doorway.

"You?" gasped D'Ajuda, drawing in his breath with a sharp hiss. Then he remained motionless, watching Keith with the utmost intentness, and white with astonishment and fear.

Gordon Keith entered the room, and, without turning his face from the intruder, he locked the door, and dropped the key into his pocket.

"I!" said he.

"You will do wisely to let me out," D'Ajuda said huskily.

"Silence, swindler and vagabond!" cried Gordon Keith. He threw off his coat, and turned back his shirt sleeves with



a deliberate gesture, and an expression in his face which made the other tremble. D'Ajuda did not want courage, but this unexpected apparition of the man he thought he had sent to certain death chilled the blood in his veins.

"I should advise you not to lay a finger on me," he said menacingly.

"Be easy. I do not intend to," answered Keith. "I have a faithful dog, who, on exceedingly rare occasions, needs a sight of this whip in the corner. I desire to apologize to Pedro, in his absence, for laying upon you his instrument of chastisement."

"Take care!" yelled D'Ajuda, and he made a rush for the door.

He had covered half the distance when the whiplash cut into his legs. He rapped out a frightful imprecation, and flew at the detective, who dodged the rush, and slashed the other round the body. With a stifled scream of agony D'Ajuda charged again, only to trip upon a rug and fall heavily.

Then the whip rose and fell as fast as Keith's arm could swing it. Three times the Sicilian rushed at his enemy, and, blinded with pain and fury, three times he fell, while the heavy whip inflicted terrible punishment.

Want of breath stayed the detective's arm at last. He unlocked the door and swung it open.

"If there is one thing I dislike," said he, steadfastly eying the marquis, who was leaning upon the mantel and uttering sounds which seemed like sobs, "it is to use personal violence. I avoid it whenever I can. But there are times when I meet such venomous cowards, such heartless scoundrels, that I cannot restrain myself. You are at liberty to retire."

D'Ajuda lifted his head. He was fearfully pale, with a trickle of blood running down his left cheek. Twice he opened his lips to speak, but no sound issued, for he was incapable of utterance. He could only bestow a look of hate on the detective which might have blanched the cheeks of a less courageous man; then he reeled, from the room, down the stairs, and Gordon Keith, watching from the window, saw him hail a cab and drive away.

Suddenly, very fatigued, Keith dropped into a chair, and felt for his pipe. He murmured:

"I did not think I had the strength for it; but the sight of the fellow made my blood boil."

The famous detective had escaped death by a hair's breadth: When Rufus Seraphim found him upon his doorstep he summoned help, and had him carried inside, and to his room. He guessed at once what was the matter, and an examination confirmed his suspicions.

The great poison specialist was the one man in London for such an occasion. He recognized the symptoms, knew the deadly acid which was corroding its way to the seat of life, and, by his prompt remedies, snatched the detective out of the very jaws of death. But for two whole days Gordon Keith had not been allowed out.

"I certainly returned at the right moment," he thought, reaching for his letters.

He looked for a communication from Checkers, but found none.

"That is scarcely surprising," he thought. "The fellow doubtless was here with the express purpose of searching for it. I wonder if he found any letter. I was wrong to let him go without finding that out. However, I must take a night's rest before my next move."

It was a delay which, had he seen Checkers' letter, he would never have permitted himself.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A TERRIBLE SIGHT—THE WATCHERS.

While Gordon Keith and the Marquis d'Ajuda were making move and countermove in a mysterious game which was now rapidly to develop, and in a most startling fashion,

Checkers was experiencing perilous proofs that Rat Hall was haunted in a singular fashion.

He returned to the inn after his adventure of his first visit to the old hall, running almost the whole distance, terribly scared. But with the morning light came a sneaking idea that he had not cut a very good figure. Keith had sent him down there to find out all he could, and he had taken to his heels at a time when he might have learned some important secret. Was it possible, after all, that the extraordinary affair of the previous night could have some natural explanation?

Checkers returned to Rat Hall next day. He watched the building from every point of view. No one came into the dark, forbidding glen, with its immense, moss-covered trees that shut out the light. No smoke curled from any of the old chimneys of the hall. Pedro showed still a strong dislike to going near the place, but Checkers made up his mind to get inside it.

Once more he passed through the wicket in the gateway, and reluctantly followed by the bloodhound, he crossed the grass-grown stones of the courtyard. He had determined to force the fastenings of the French windows of the dining room, and this he had little difficulty in doing. He bestowed but a hasty glance at the few articles of furniture in the room, and the moth-eaten, faded hangings upon the paneled walls. His idea was to make a rapid tour through the house, and get out as quickly as possible.

The second room which he entered was also on the ground floor. A small table covered with a cloth which moths had eaten to rags stood in the centre. The oak boards were without covering, and their once polished surface was replaced by a gray film of mildew. On one of the walls was an oil painting which attracted Checkers' attention. It was the portrait of an exceedingly beautiful girl in evening dress. Checkers told himself that he had never looked on such a lovely face.

He passed from this room to others without making any discovery. He was about to leave the house when an impulse sent him again into the second room he had visited to have one more look at the portrait. Then he received a shock of astonishment.

The painting was still there, but it had been scored across in all directions, the beautiful face obliterated, and the work of art utterly ruined.

Checkers rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was impossible for him to resist the sensation of terror which had seized him the previous night. It was in vain that he told himself that some one had visited the room during his brief absence. What earthly purpose could a human hand serve by such an act of destruction?

"This is a creepy place!" muttered Checkers, a shiver running down his spine.

Certainly no human being could cross the floor without leaving an impression upon its mildewed surface. Checkers perceived the marks of his own footprints. He went slowly forward, followed by the shrinking bloodhound, bending low to distinguish any other traces, when suddenly he seemed to step into empty air!

Pedro uttered a howl of terror, which was echoed by Checkers; then both shot downward into a black gulf.

The violent impact of Checkers' body against a stone floor broke off his shout of alarm. The shock well-nigh robbed him of his senses. He looked up, but perceived no aperture through which he had fallen.

"I must have trod on the catch of some spring that caused a part of the floor to shoot from under me," he thought; "or else it was worked by an unseen hand. Oh, what a fool I was to enter this place! If ever I succeed in getting clear of—"

He stopped reflecting, for Pedro was making a singular noise—half growl, half whine. As the place was in almost complete gloom—Checkers' eyes not having yet become accustomed to a thin ray of light that streamed through a



grating—he failed to perceive any cause for the hound's anxiety.

"What is it, old chap?" said Checkers, and, stooping down, he touched the dog's back. He felt the bristles standing erect, while a violent trembling was shaking the bloodhound. What did he see that Checkers could not? What peril was its instinct warning it against?

Checkers had not long to wait for an answer to that question. As he moved forward gingerly, he felt something run across his foot. He sprang back with a gasp, and came down upon something that uttered a shrill squeak that seemed echoed and reechoed above, beneath—everywhere!

"The rats!" cried Checkers, appalled.

He remembered the tale that he had heard—that the underground cellars of the old hall were overrun with rats. Well he understood Pedro's fear!

A ringing cry for help left Checkers' lips. The massive walls of the place muffled the sound. To that cry the dog added its long-drawn whines of terror and menacing snarls. There was a curious note in the great bloodhound's tongue which Checkers had not heard before, and the terrible question, "Is it going mad?" flashed through his brain.

For an instant he felt his own reason rock. He strove to control himself. There was the iron grating, high up in one of the walls. Though he knew he could not hope to reach it, yet Checkers put all his strength into the leap. He missed by many inches, and his finger tips scraped down the green slime and foul ooze of the walls.

Then a panic gripped his nerves. He rushed blindly forward, beating with bare hands upon the stones, while Pedro lifted up his voice with that strange note in it which made Checkers' blood run cold. Then suddenly an extraordinary thing happened. A dazzling sheet of light cleft the darkness, there was a dulled roar, Checkers was hurled back as if he had been discharged from a mortar, and this time consciousness deserted him.

He awoke to find a rough tongue licking his face. Gradually recollection of what had occurred came to him. But now there was considerable light in the place, and as Checkers looked round with dazed, aching eyes, he saw that something had made a jagged breach in the outer wall, midway between the floor and the roof.

The light had dispersed the rats. Pedro had regained his normal composure, and looked somewhat ashamed of himself. Checkers reeled to his feet, feeling himself all over to assure himself that his skin held no broken bones.

"If this is not a fearsome place, what is?" he muttered.

His wits were too dazed to permit him even to conjecture what had happened to open a way of escape. With Pedro, he was firmly convinced that the old hall was haunted, and, without Gordon Keith's company, he intended to enter it no more. To climb through the aperture in the outer wall was easy work.

This meant a slight drop into a wide, dry ditch filled with nettles; but there was no help for it. In less than two minutes they were clear of the place. Checkers turned and shook his fist at the tottering chimneys and ivy-grown gables of Rat Hall. Then he entered the glen with the bloodhound. He had not taken fifty steps when he came to an abrupt halt.

"Some one talking," he whispered to himself, and laid a restraining hand upon Pedro's collar.

The sound of human voices betokened something more tangible than fire-illuminated spectres, the screaming of phantom women, the disfiguring of pictures by an unseen hand, the mysterious collapse of solid floors, and equally mysterious earthquake shocks that tore openings in a stone wall. Checkers' nerve returned to him. He began to advance with the utmost caution in the direction whence the voices proceeded.

They came from a spot midway up one side of the precipitous glen. Checkers went by for a score of yards, crawled up the timber-covered, sodden bank, and approached

on hands and knees. What he saw was certainly not alarming.

A woman in a white motoring coat, and heavily veiled, was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, and a man was at her side. The woman had a hand upon the other's shoulder, and was gazing into his face with a pleading look. Checkers could hear her voice plainly—a pretty, cooing, caressing voice.

"But you will tell me—your own Gabrielle?" she said.

The man answered with a merry laugh.

"Why, what difference can it make whether you know or not?"

"You mean that you cannot trust me? You think I cannot keep a secret?"

"Oh, I am sure I can trust you, Gabrielle!"

"Then tell me. Come, to show that you love me, Miles."

"Do you doubt my love, then?"

"To show that you trust me."

"Well, I will give you that proof of my love and trust," said the other, after a slight hesitation. He took out a pocketbook and scribbled upon a leaf, which he tore out and handed to his companion.

"And is that all?" she asked, looking at what he had written.

"Yes, that is the whole secret."

"Thank you, Miles," said the woman, and, folding the paper, she placed it inside her dress. "I am sure now that you care for me. I was beginning to doubt it because you would not, in your letters, tell me where you were. —I, who thought of you every hour."

"But how did you discover where I was?" asked Miles Oldershaw—for the young man was no other—in a puzzled tone.

"That is my secret," said Gabrielle Branza playfully. "You see, I could not rest without seeing you. But you ought to have told me where to find you, considering that I, and no one else, put you on your guard against D'Ajuda."

"It was because I feared my whereabouts might become known to him, through you, that I withheld my address, Gabrielle."

"You need not have feared that. I kept away from him when I made the discovery that he was in love with that chit of an English girl—Verna Willoughby—whom you once cared for. Ah, my words hurt you! You care for her still?"

"We need not talk of her," answered Oldershaw, in a low tone. "How did you find out that the Marquis d'Ajuda was in love with her?"

"I long suspected it, and one night, in the garden of Lady Greenacres' town house, I heard him declare his passion to her. It was after a bridge evening."

"And she—Verna—what did she answer?" said Oldershaw, in the same suppressed tone.

"She refused him. As I warned you, he is a terrible man who sticks at nothing. He swore that he would marry her, whether she would or no. That was why he abducted her to that house in Smoke Street. How strange that you should have found her there!"

"It was no coincidence. I had gone to London from here that day to see her, for the last time. I learned she was at Lady Greenacres', where I had practically forbidden her to go, ruining herself at those bridge parties. I saw her come out alone. I had no idea, as I followed her, that she had been taken in that house by force. It was a dark night, rather foggy, and though I saw the house she vanished into, I failed to see force used. I waited about, and when I saw those men arrive, one by one, and get into the house by the queer signal they used, then I suspected foul play. I got in by the same means as they, and it was lucky for her that I did. I left her as soon as she was free, and caught the next train back again."

"I am glad you saved that foolish girl, though she had



only herself to blame. You wince. You are sure you do not love her still?"

"And you, Gabrielle. You are sure you do not care for D'Ajuda? You did not warn me against him, because you loved him, and when you saw that he wanted Verna, turned against him out of jealous revenge? That is a question I am always asking myself."

Gabrielle recoiled, as if the words went home. But she answered simply:

"I never loved D'Ajuda. He—he is too great a villain. I warned you of his intent toward you just because you were everything to me, Miles."

"But, pardon my insistence, how did you know of his intent? You and he must have been on the most friendly terms that he should have told you of his reason for coming to England?"

"I will not deny that at one time he loved me. He confided in me, though I am sure I never asked him to do so. As for our being in England at the same time, that was a pure coincidence. I had business here as well as he. I knew of his secret mission, and that was why I wanted to make your acquaintance. I had no intention of interfering with his plans, for they were nothing to me, and D'Ajuda is a very dangerous man to thwart. Those plans were two in number, though I have told you only of that which directly concerned your safety. And in putting you on your guard I have imperiled my life, for the marquis would assuredly kill me if he knew."

"Let him hurt a hair of your head, Gabrielle!" answered Oldershaw passionately. "I at least do not fear him. I came away more to avoid his spying about than dread of him. His plans were two, you say? What was the other?"

"To fulfill a vow of revenge against an Englishman—Mordaunt Willoughby—who insulted the Marquis d'Ajuda in a deadly fashion at a Berlin club. The girl Verna is that Englishman's daughter, and—What is the matter?"

"And this unscrupulous scoundrel made a gambler of her to revenge himself? Is that what you tell me?" interrupted Oldershaw, with a note of real pain, almost compunction, mingled with his indignation. "Ah, I wish I had known as much before!"

"And if you had," said Gabrielle, laying a tight hand upon her companion's wrist, and speaking in a choked voice, "would that have made any difference? Would you have continued to love her?"

"Do not ask me," said Oldershaw, burying his face in his hands. "I met you, and I want you only, Gabrielle. Be satisfied with that. But later on, when I have finished my work here, I will deal with the Marquis Raoul d'Ajuda in my own fashion."

"In a way, fate has already punished him, for he is madly in love with the girl whom he has ruined at cards."

"I would rather he had worked his way with me, and not with Verna," muttered Oldershaw.

"You must avenge her. It is D'Ajuda's passion for play that sent him here to steal your secret. He held a captaincy of Chasseurs in one of the most exclusive corps. High stakes is an offense that is winked at there, but he went further, and he was caught—cheating. The fact was known to but a couple of his superiors. He was offered expulsion, with the terrible disgrace which that meant, or the acceptance of a secret mission. That mission I have told you about. You are a leading authority on explosives. The fact that you were perfecting a new explosive of enormous power to be used in war against air ships had leaked out, despite your precautions. It was realized that such a secret was of immense value. D'Ajuda accepted the mission of coming to England with the purpose of stealing your secret at all costs. A better man for the purpose could not have been made use of. He sticks at nothing. He came, and at once began to watch you. He himself had spies in his pay, who had their eyes upon you. It was they who assisted him in the matter of the English girl. You

could not have escaped him. But I warned you, Miles. I told you of his designs. I put you on your guard. Your only chance lay in instant flight, in hiding yourself in some obscure place where he would not look for you. You did wisely to follow my counsel, to disappear at once, and mysteriously. And you baffled him completely. He was furious—mad. He was fully aware that your secret was well-nigh perfected, and that in a few weeks you would offer it to the English war department, where it would be snapped up at your own price, for this country is far behind in military air ships, and such an explosive as you offered—or will offer—must be welcomed. D'Ajuda knew this. He knew that he had not a day to spare, and he could not find you!

"I watched him, though he was not aware of the fact. When he turned from me and thought only of the English girl, you may be sure he took me no longer into his confidences. Then he did a serious thing from his own point of view. He went to Gordon Keith."

"The famous detective?" interrupted Oldershaw, astonished.

"No other. I do not know what story he told him, but he must have gone to him with some tale, and with the one idea of putting Gordon Keith on your track."

"Serious, indeed!" cried Oldershaw, with a laugh. "For he will have to throw a lot of dust in the detective's eyes if he hopes to deceive him with a trumped-up yarn. I see. He wanted me found at once, and so he went to the best man for the work. Yet Gordon Keith has not found me?"

"He has."

Oldershaw wheeled round.

"How do you know that?" he cried.

"I—I have seen his young assistant near here," answered Gabrielle. "But that does not matter. If the detective—Ah, what was that?"

"You heard something?" said Oldershaw, getting up and peering into the thick undergrowth that covered the gloomy sides of the ravine.

"I fancied it," said Gabrielle, after a pause. "Sit down by me. And so you have completed your invention at last?"

"Yes, I have finished it, though it nearly finished me more than once. Did you hear that muffled sound an hour ago, like an underground explosion? Well, it was an explosion. I had left a dangerous liquid compound in a zinc tank in one of the cellars of Rat Hall, and had forgotten its existence. It explodes at a very low temperature—seventy-six Fahrenheit—and it went off. Luckily there was but a little of the stuff, and as there was no one in the cellar—Why do you look so frightened?"

"No—no, of—of course there was no one in the cellar," stammered Gabrielle.

"How pale you are! I have had many narrow shaves, but they should not occur again. I leave this place in a day or two, and I have an appointment at the war office on Wednesday. I think I can promise them that no air ship or aeroplane now being made can exist anywhere near such a bursting time-shell as I propose to send up."

Not a word of this conversation missed the eager ears of Checkers, who was crouching behind a bush, barely two yards from the speakers. When Oldershaw got up, and looked round, Checkers felt decidedly queer. He understood now the manner of his startling release from the cellar,



though he still failed to see exactly how he came to be in that place. What he had heard threw light on many things.

He was terribly cramped, yet dared not move. Suddenly he saw something which chilled the blood in his heart.

Gabrielle Branza was saying to Oldershaw:

"There, I have told you all. I have hidden nothing from you."

"And I, in turn, have given you my confidence," said the other. "When I have settled matters of business, I shall deal with this villain D'Ajuda."

He went on speaking, but Checkers heard no more. His eyes were fixed upon a crouching figure which he could just see behind a mass of tangled blackberry bushes to his right, and higher up the steep side of the glen. It was the figure of a man, with face pallid, the lips drawn back over the teeth like a wolf's. As he extended his right hand in the act of crawling farther toward the speakers, Checkers saw the dull gleam of a knife.

Checkers needed no one to tell him that he was looking at D'Ajuda, who had been listening to the story of his betrayal by the woman he had once loved, and who, insane with passion, was about to take immediate and frightful revenge.

For a moment Checkers was paralyzed. What ought he to do? But one thing, clearly. He must give the alarm.

In another second he would have sprung to his feet with a ringing shout; but at that instant he felt his left wrist clinched in a grip of iron.

"Still!" said a voice in his ear, so soft that it was like the whisper of the wind through a bush.

Checkers turned his head.

And he looked straight into the face of Gordon Keith!

## CHAPTER X.

### "THE RATS LEAVING RAT HALL!"

It was a moment which Checkers never forgot. In spite of the peril and excitement of the occasion he was conscious of an enormous relief on finding the detective at his side.

Keith, prone upon the ground, had his head and chest slightly raised. His right hand held a revolver, and the weapon was leveled upon the unsuspecting marquis.

It was evident that the detective was most reluctant to fire, since that would entail his showing himself. He watched that slowly shifting figure of D'Ajuda as a cat looks at a mouse that creeps inch by inch from its crouching enemy.

Gabrielle was saying:

"And when we are married, you must take me away, so that D'Ajuda never finds me. He will follow me to the end of the earth when he discovers that——"

The sentence was never finished. The lurking assassin rose suddenly to fling himself upon the couple. He was never nearer to his end than at that moment, for Gordon Keith's finger was in the act of pressing upon the trigger; but he relaxed that pressure as an unexpected interruption occurred.

Both he and Checkers had forgotten the presence of

Pedro. The bloodhound, who had been watching the marquis intently, gathered itself together, and hurled its huge bulk straight at the would-be murderer.

There was a terrible cry as D'Ajuda went down as if struck by a cannon ball. Gabrielle sprang to her feet with a scream, and without waiting to see what had happened, fled in the direction of the house. Oldershaw stood as if struck by lightning, too astonished to move.

Only the steep sides of the glen saved D'Ajuda from the bloodhound's fangs. He went crashing down the ravine, rolling over and over with gathering force, and disappeared in the far-down depths. Gordon Keith flew at Pedro, gripping him by the collar, and exerting all his great strength to keep the dog from rushing after its enemy.

Oldershaw was the first to speak. "What, in Heaven's name, is the meaning of this?" he demanded savagely.

Keith, who had now mastered the dog, looked up.

"I gather from your tone, Mr. Oldershaw, that you did not perceive the danger from which this dog snatched you," he answered.

"I saw some one crashing down there, if that's what you mean."

"Some one who was on the very brink of plunging a knife into you, my friend," said the detective sternly.

A flash of comprehension passed over the other's face.

"Are you Mr. Gordon Keith?" he asked eagerly.

"So I am called."

"Ah! Permit me to apologize for the roughness of my tone. And that figure that just crashed down into the ravine was the Marquis d'Ajuda?"

"Exactly."

"Will you shake hands with me, Mr. Keith? You have saved my life. A mere 'I thank you,' sounds tame, but I speak it from my heart."

"If you are really grateful, Mr. Oldershaw, you will return with me at once to the inn where—where my friend Checkers is staying."

Oldershaw hesitated, and looked in the direction taken by Gabrielle.

"At once!" repeated Keith. "I have something very serious to say to you."

"Then I will come," answered Oldershaw.

Half an hour later they were closeted together in an interview that was to prove of momentous importance.

"Checkers," said Gordon Keith, "you wrote to me from here, and it is clear that you mentioned the name of the house I sent you to watch. That was a mistake, for D'Ajuda got hold of the letter. You were not to know that, of course. He had the start of me."

"But why did you want either me or my house watched, Mr. Keith?" asked Oldershaw.

"Because you were and are in a position of the gravest danger. You wonder, possibly, how that comes to concern me. I will answer frankly. I want to save you for the sake of the girl whose heart beats for you, for Verna Willoughby's sake."

Oldershaw colored violently.

"You are very thoughtful," said he coldly.

"And very interfering, you would like to add. Have you any idea of the peril in which you stand?"



"If you mean that this scoundrel D'Ajuda is willing to go to any lengths to obtain a certain secret——"

"That is half my meaning. There is another half. Mr. Oldershaw, beware of Gabrielle Branza!"

"Ah, do not insult that girl!" said the other hotly.

"Prove that I insult her, and I will apologize. My friend, you do not understand her."

"You are wrong to suspect her. She put me on my guard against D'Ajuda."

"Why? Because she hates him, because he has jilted her, because she wanted to revenge herself."

"I will not listen to you. She loves me, and I love her. Remember that."

"I remember that Gabrielle Branza, as she calls herself, is a woman who is known in three European capitals as an adventuress, a political schemer, a dangerous woman. And I know, for a certain fact, that she has won at bridge—a game in which D'Ajuda was almost invariably her partner—thousands of pounds!"

"I don't, I can't believe it!" said Oldershaw hoarsely.

"It is the truth. She is as much responsible for the ruin of Verna Willoughby at cards as the marquis himself. They dragged her down between them."

"It's false," said Oldershaw, who appeared to be choking.

"And she and the marquis meant to work together to get your secret, and it was only that matter of jealousy which parted them."

"A lie!" panted Oldershaw. "She is good as she is lovely."

"I will forgive the word, for you will regret it later on. I ask you once more, my friend, to break with this woman."

"And I absolutely refuse."

The detective nodded his head; Oldershaw rose to leave.

"But I have something to tell you, guv'nor," cut in Checkers.

"Let us hear it," said Keith. "And you, Mr. Oldershaw, may well stay a moment to listen."

"It concerns the Manor House," began Checkers. And he told, with great minuteness, all that had happened during the detective's absence, stopping when he had related his escape from the rat-infested cellar. "I was sure the place was haunted," he concluded; "but as that was explained naturally, the rest might be."

Gordon Keith appeared to have fallen asleep. Oldershaw looked at him in some disgust.

"I can clear up the first part of your mystery," he said, addressing himself to Checkers, and turning his back upon Keith. "You saw a vivid red flash, with a man standing in the centre of the light. Well, I was the man, and the flame was caused in one of my chemical experiments. As for the woman's scream that you heard, I fancied I heard it myself. I believe now that Gabrielle was near, as you were, and that she cried out in sudden terror. That is part of the mystery made clear, Mr. Gordon Keith, is it not?"

The detective did not reply. He really looked as if he was asleep.

"But concerning the picture?" asked Checkers.

"I have an idea of seeing a picture in that room," replied Oldershaw, "though I did not look at it particularly, for I

confined my attention to the basement of that horrible old hall, and left the rest alone. At night I slept out. The painting must have been cut up all the time."

"No, no; I am certain it was not when I first entered the room," insisted Checkers warmly. And he looked at the detective to help him out.

But Gordon Keith was silent as the grave.

"As for your tumbling into the cellar," said Oldershaw, with a laugh, "I am not surprised, for Marshmould Manor has many secret tricks of the kind in its floors and walls. I detest the place, though my uncle, the old squire, was fond of it enough. You trod on a secret spring, and were lucky to escape as you did."

With the words Oldershaw made a movement to leave the room. He called out, in a tone that had just a suggestion of scorn:

"Good-by, Mr. Gordon Keith."

"Before you go," said the detective weariedly, and pulling out his pipe, "you might admit Mademoiselle Gabrielle Branza, for I hear her voice outside."

Checkers sprang to the door, and there was Gabrielle. Oldershaw welcomed her with outstretched hands.

"I wondered what had become of you, Miles," she said reproachfully, and with a swift glance of profound distrust at Keith, who was filling his brier. "I made inquiries, and was told that you had gone with two gentlemen to this inn. I did not know that one of them was Mr. Gordon Keith, whom I have met once or twice at Lady Greenacres' parties. I was so horribly frightened at what happened just now. I did not understand what really occurred, and felt that I must find you at once to hear about it. You were talking about me when I came in?"

"Not exactly, mademoiselle," said Gordon Keith, as Gabrielle took the chair he pushed forward for her. "We were talking about that bad old squire who lived in Marshmould Manor, and who——" He stopped suddenly, for Gabrielle had started to her feet deathly white.

"Who married a dancer whom he met in a Spanish city," continued the detective, "years and years younger than he; who, for reasons best known to herself, fled on the night of his terrible death, and who has not been recognized in this country until the present moment, when she stands confronting us in this room!"

Gabrielle uttered an inarticulate cry. Her hands rushed to her throat, as if she were strangling. Oldershaw stood as if turned to stone, his eyes fixed upon her. He was the first to speak.

"It—it is the truth?" he said hoarsely, advancing a step. "You—you were my uncle's young bride?"

"Well, and what if it is true?" was the suddenly flashed-out hot retort. In a moment the woman was changed. She drew herself up, flashed a glance of hate at the detective and of haughty scorn upon Oldershaw.

"What if it is true?" she repeated, stamping her foot.

"You—you did not tell me that," answered Oldershaw, an expression of despair and grief in his eyes. "You deceived me."

"In that and many things," cut in Keith.

"I am not here to be questioned or to be dictated to," was the haughty answer.



The next moment and the door had closed upon her. There was a minute of absolute silence; then, with a choking cry, Miles Oldershaw hurried from the room.

"The parting of the ways," said Keith, relighting his pipe, which had gone out. "He has broken with her; for, unless I am much mistaken, he is the sort of fellow who will forgive anything but deceit. A fine young fellow, Checkers, and we must look after him, for he is not out of the wood yet. Checkers, you are a perfect treasure. But for you, that girl would have beaten me."

"However did you find out, guv'nor?" asked the astonished Checkers.

"It was not difficult. In the first place I was interested in the story of Sam Jenkins, the old gardener, which you repeated to us just now, and I wondered what could have become of the beautiful young dancer from Spain whom the old squire married. Then it seemed curious to me that Gabrielle Branza, as she calls herself, should have guessed where to look for young Oldershaw, the heir. Then your incident of the picture made me think hard. You said it was the portrait of a beautiful young girl, obviously the old squire's wife. You found it cut to pieces. Whoever did that had a strong motive. I argued that if the original of the portrait turned up she might have a splendid reason for destroying it. Was it possible, therefore, that she had turned up? When you spoke of being shot through the seemingly solid oak floor, my suspicion was greatly strengthened, for who but that young wife would possess a knowledge of the secret springs, traps, and panels that abound in Rat Hall? I felt almost convinced. When Gabrielle came into the room I watched your face to see if you recognized in her then unveiled face the original of the painting before it was spoiled. I saw you start. Though I doubted no longer, yet I felt my way, by beginning to speak to her of the old squire. She turned very white, and then I was certain. Simple enough?"

"Yes," answered Checkers admiringly. "But it is only you who see these simple things."

"You flatter me, Checkers. It was, however, fortunate that I arrived when I did. I heard only the latter part of the conversation of Oldershaw and the girl, but I can pretty well guess what the first part was. I perceived D'Ajuda's game after our little visit to Oldershaw's rooms in the Marylebone Road. You did not see, my dear Checkers, when we entered that laboratory in the basement, a man suddenly hide himself by springing into a cupboard?"

"Good heavens, no!" cried Checkers.

"I only saw his coat tails as he leaped in. I suspected at once that it was our friend the marquis, but I did not want him to know then that I was on his track. To put him off the clue I made pretense, by loudly uttered remarks, that I was at fault and wasting my time there.

"As a matter of fact, I was intensely interested in all that I examined. It was clear to me that young Oldershaw was an experimenter of no mean skill. Was it possible that D'Ajuda's idea was to steal some secret in explosives—a science in which Oldershaw is a recognized master? If not, whatever took him there so stealthily into the laboratory? The idea at once supplied me with a powerful reason for D'Ajuda's visit to me in my consulting room. Older-

shaw was missing, and the marquis wanted him found—at once. He paid me the compliment of coming to me as the one man who could help him. He had to tell me some story in which Miles Oldershaw was concerned, and an unusual story, too, or I should not have taken up the case. So he told me of that affair in Smoke Street, naming himself as Oldershaw, and clearly meaning to drop the disguise directly afterward. I should then, he argued, wonder what had become of my client, and begin to search for him, while he—D'Ajuda—followed on my track. It was very clever.

"This flashed up before me as I examined the laboratory. In a drawer there, you may recollect, I found a letter addressed to Oldershaw. He should not have left it, for it was from a high official at the war office, and spoke of our inventor's almost perfected explosive shell, specially designed for the destruction of aerial craft in war. I had the secret at once. The Marquis d'Ajuda was the very man to be employed as spy and thief.

"Of course, I was not absolutely sure that the fellow in the cupboard was the man I wanted, but I solved the doubt in a simple fashion. There was a smashed bottle on the floor by the table, and as I examined it I found marks of blood here and there—fresh marks. The man in hiding had cut himself. I looked about with care, and on the surface of the deal table I found just what I wanted—the impression of a blood-stained finger—the second finger of a man's left hand. I had only to see D'Ajuda's left hand to make sure that he had cut himself—badly, for the drops of blood I saw were large ones. I accordingly paid a visit to Lady Greenacres' card party. The marquis kept his gloves on. That made me all but certain, but I took occasion to give his finger a good hard nip, and he winced under the pain, for I touched the wound. My case was then complete. I had to come down here and warn Oldershaw. Unfortunately, D'Ajuda scored the next point, for he tried to poison me, and got hold of your letters, Checkers, which gave him the very address he wanted."

"I was never more glad to see you, guv'nor, than when you touched me on the wrist in that horrible glen. What are you going to do now?"

"I have a fancy to see Rat Hall by moonlight. Come along!"

They left the inn, taking the bloodhound with them. The moon had risen, and poured a flood of silver light upon the stretch of moorland, but its rays were shut out as they plunged into the glen, which became steeper at every stride.

"An evil place," said Keith. "What a spot to build a big house in, to be sure! I would not live there for a fortune, and—Hark!"

As the detective uttered the exclamation, stooping as he listened intently, there reached the ears of Checkers and the others a weird sound, such as neither had heard before. It obviously affected Pedro, who whined softly and kept close to his companions.

"The manor is haunted, after all!" whispered Checkers.

Gordon Keith pushed forward. He reached the great gate of the old mansion and peered through at the moon-illuminated courtyard. A moment later he started back, gripped Checkers by the arm, and almost dragged him bodily up one of the steep banks.



"My soul, what a thing to see!" said the detective.

Checkers looked back. From the height they had reached he could see over the ivy-encircled wall of the mansion. He saw the grass-grown courtyard, and swarming across it, tumbling over each other in their haste, came an army of enormous rats.

Checkers felt his blood run cold.

"The rats are leaving Rat Hall!" said Keith. "Why?"

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE FATAL FLAME.

When the Marquis Raoul St. Anselm Stefano d'Ajuda went crashing headlong down the gloomy ravine he was stunned by the tumble, and lay for an hour in the oozy bed of the glen without thought or feeling. Then he came to himself. Slowly recollection of what he had overheard and of what had happened to him returned. It was not a pleasant remembrance. He reeled to his feet, and he cursed.

"The cards are going against me!" he muttered. "That frightful beast was Gordon Keith's dog, and Gordon Keith must have been there. I may be beaten in this game, but if I do not make that infernal detective suffer for it may these hands never hold a card again!"

He presented a pitiable object as he moved away. He was covered with scratches, and his clothes bore great jagged rips and tears. The sight of the old manor made him realize that it might be as well if he could get in there, if only to rearrange his person, for he could scarcely show himself at a hotel in that plight. The wicket gate was open, and he went unsteadily across the courtyard, mounted a flight of moss-covered stone steps, moved along a terrace with a crumbling parapet, and entered by an oaken door, which he found ajar.

He was in the hall of the old mansion. Moonlight streamed in through a large mullioned window and showed great cobwebs pendent from the black oak rafters, and dust and decay everywhere. It was not a place that charmed him by its antiquity, and he shivered as he stood scowling about him.

At that instant he heard the sound of other footsteps upon the terrace. For a second he stood listening, then sprang back into a thick shadow. A figure immediately appeared at the hall entrance. It was quite clear in the moonlight, and the lurking man recognized Miles Oldershaw.

He drew in his breath sharply. Miles passed into the hall, closed the oaken door, and struck a wax vesta, which he applied to a candle in a holder which was placed in readiness on a blackened chest alongside the wall. He advanced, almost touching D'Ajuda, who pressed his body flat against the wainscoting.

Miles went forward and mounted a long, curving flight of very shallow stairs, gnawed and worm-eaten, and like a shadow the marquis followed him, a terrible light in his watching eyes, his body in a crouching posture, stealthy as a lynx.

Suspecting nothing, Oldershaw passed along a gallery,

through a door at the farther end, which admitted into a much narrower corridor. The candle, which he held above his head, emitted a thin and trembling ray, that shimmered on the bare, paneled walls. The air was damp and unwholesome, and struck with a chill to his bones. He said to himself, speaking aloud for the company of his own voice:

"The last visit I mean to pay to this rotting old house! After to-day I'll sell it for what I can get before it drops to pieces."

"Will you!" murmured D'Ajuda. The words were in the merest whisper, but the corridor had an echo in it that he had not reckoned upon. Miles stopped, and turned swiftly.

The marquis leaped back, noiseless and agile as a cat. The light of the candle extended into the gloom for a few yards and became lost.

"Who's there?" called out Oldershaw sharply.

His words died away in lingering echoes of "Who's there—there—there!"

"This place is enough to get on any one's nerves!" said he, and continued his journey.

He flung back a door at the end of the passage, and instantly an icy rush of air blew out his light. Grumbling to himself, he found and lighted another match. This time he shielded the candle with his left hand as he passed down a very long flight of steps—stone at first, then wood. So profound was the darkness, so musty and chilling the atmosphere, that for a moment D'Ajuda hesitated to follow the other into what seemed a frightful pit.

Oldershaw stood at last on solid ground. He was in a vault of considerable size. He heard the scuttling off of innumerable rats as the light scared them into their burrows and holes. He was not in the least nervous of them, and had fitted up the big vault in a rough manner as an underground workshop, where no one had dreamed of his presence, and where he had been quite unmolested.

"I must not leave any dangerous stuff about," said he, still speaking aloud. "That cask of explosive powder, for instance, must be rendered harmless."

He put the candle on a table, took up a bottle of some liquid, and approached a good-sized keg of black powder in a corner of the vault. Then a sheet of dazzling flame leaped across his eyes; he flung out his arms, and crashed to the ground.

D'Ajuda had struck him down with the end of a pistol. Oldershaw lay senseless upon the stones. His enemy commenced a hurried search for some means of securing his victim, but all he could find were odd pieces of cord of varying thicknesses, which had been cut from packages and boxes that lay scattered about. With feverish haste he knotted these together, and succeeded in lashing Oldershaw's arms to his sides, and in securing his legs. Then he lifted him onto the table, and passed a cord round his body and fastened it under the table in a strong knot.

The inventor came to his senses ten minutes later. His dazed eyes looked up into the mocking ones of his terrible enemy.

"Pardon the considerable personal inconvenience to which I have been reluctantly compelled to submit you," said the marquis. "You know me, do you not?"



For a few seconds Oldershaw's brain could form no clear idea of what had occurred; then he commenced to struggle, but he was so strongly secured that he could move no limb.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he panted. "Let me go, you scoundrel, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Ah—ah, no names!" said the marquis. "Let us at least be polite to one another. Is it very necessary that I enter into detail? You must be aware of my reasons for placing you in such a position. They are powerful reasons, as you know. Mademoiselle Branza took the liberty of explaining them to you two hours ago. Briefly, you have a secret in explosives which would mean everything—honor, fortune, all—to me. That secret I want—will have! You understand?"

"Are you mad, that you take such a step?" cried Oldershaw, who could scarcely believe his ears.

"Answer that question as you will. I have taken the step; that should be sufficient for you. I am a desperate man, my friend. Once more, will you give me what I want?"

"Never!" shouted Oldershaw, and he redoubled his efforts to free himself.

"Ah, but you will alter your decision!" said the marquis grimly. He lifted his pistol and took aim between his victim's eyes. "Choose!" said he.

"Fire!" answered the other.

D'Ajuda hesitated.

"You have mistaken your prey, you rascal!" went on Oldershaw. "I am not afraid of you! Go on—murder me! Only, remember that Gordon Keith will be at your heels, and that he will hound you down!"

The marquis changed color. The mocking in his eyes gave place to an angry glare. He dropped his weapon into a pocket.

"You think I cannot tame you?" he snarled. "You are mistaken. I have yet to meet a man who is not afraid of me. I will choose another way."

He sprang to the cask of blasting powder and rolled it on its edge, so that it rested within three yards of his victim, and just where he could see it. Then he took the candle holder from a shelf, tugged the candle from it, made a hole with his finger in the centre of the powder, and proceeded to place the lighted candle in it.

"Be careful!" roared the prisoner. "There is enough stuff there to blow the whole house sky-high! I tell you that a single spark——"

"Oh, but I am perfectly aware of the fact!" laughed D'Ajuda. His hands were absolutely steady as he carefully pressed the powder tightly round the candle's base. Whatever his many vices, cowardice was not one of them.

With starting eyeballs, Oldershaw watched the deadly process. His work finished, the marquis stepped back. He said, in a perfectly calm voice:

"I should estimate that there are between four and five inches of candle there, and I should say that its life cannot exceed a couple of hours at the most—possibly less. Naturally, I have no intention of remaining to see if my guess is an accurate one. I shall leave that to you."

"You fiend!" panted the victim.

"Be easy! I am not going without giving you a chance.

Once more, will you sell me your secret, for your life? The price is worth it."

"I defy you!" answered Oldershaw.

"Defiance is a fine thing, but life is finer."

"Go, you black-hearted scoundrel! I only ask that I be rid of the sight of you!"

D'Ajuda whitened with fury. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"*Peste!* You are, at any rate, brave!" he answered. "Adieu, my friend! If one thing is certain it is that your body will never be found. No one saw me come here, no one will see me go."

D'Ajuda went out. On the stairway he paused for five minutes, waiting in the event of his prisoner calling to him to return, but no appeal came, and, cursing his luck, the marquis left Rat Hall as secretly as he had entered it.

Miles Oldershaw was alone. His staring eyes roamed despairingly round the big vault, that was but dimly illumined by that single flame of the candle. The flame swung slowly this and that way in the faint movement of an occasional air draught. A circle of bluish light gleamed round it, born of the exceeding foulness of the atmosphere. Beyond that wavering circle stretched a feeble, nebulous glow, and beyond that thick shadows gathered, and were merged in total gloom.

Pendent, horrible webs hung from the low stone roof, and stirred faintly by the trifle of heat from the flare, they bent backward and forward, and curled upward, and seemed trying to detach themselves from their fragile hold.

The silence was absolute. The silence of very death.

The appalling nature of the situation was too great for the prisoner, and for a few minutes he lapsed into a half-unconscious condition.

The flame swung to and fro, the blue circle shifted with it, the pendent webs swayed backward and forward, the silence was the silence of death.

Lower and lower burned the candle; nearer and nearer to the powder crept the fatal flame.

## CHAPTER XII.

### PEDRO'S TERROR.

"The rats are leaving Rat Hall," said Gordon Keith. "Why?"

The detective and Checkers watched, with fascinated eyes, the flight of the only tenants that the old house had known for years. Pedro shivered. He seemed to have an unconquerable aversion to that swarming multitude.

"They say that rats leave a sinking ship," said Checkers, awestruck.

"They have a curious and wonderful instinct," answered Gordon Keith. "I am inclined to believe that the horrible old house is doomed. Then look what a hurry they are in! Checkers, I do not remember to have seen anything quite like this before. It is extraordinarily interesting."

The tenants of Rat Hall swarmed through the gateway, and went with a rush into the dark recesses of the bed of the ravine.



"All gone," said Keith reflectively. There was a spell of silence, then he added: "I came here with the express intention of examining the old hall; but in view of what we have seen we will leave the place alone. I am not superstitious, Checkers, as you know; but there is something about that rat exodus which gives me a sort of shiver of apprehension. Pedro seems to feel it, too, for he wants to be off. Come away!"

They started to leave the gloomy ravine; but suddenly the detective stopped. He remained in a perfectly motionless attitude, and appeared to be listening with the utmost intentness.

"You heard something, guv'nor?" said Checkers at last.

Keith was still silent; then he lifted a finger.

"There!" he said. "You heard it?"

"No," replied Checkers.

The night wind was uttering a melancholy cry as it romped through the great elms and chestnuts higher up the slope.

"Hark!" said Keith again.

Checkers strained his ears until they almost moved, but not a sound could he detect save the roaring in the foliage.

"I am almost sure that I heard a human call," said Gordon Keith. "It seemed to come from the hall."

Suddenly the bloodhound lifted its enormous head and uttered a howl of intense mournfulness.

"The dog feels it in the air," said Keith. "Checkers, there is some one in the manor who wants help. We must see what it means."

They clambered down toward the gateway. Suddenly the detective stooped and picked up a torn fragment of cloth which he examined with care.

"A piece of an overcoat," said he, "and from the look of it it has not been there a day. It must have been torn from D'Ajuda's coat in his ungraceful descent to the bottom. We will see what Pedro thinks of it."

He applied it to the bloodhound's nostrils. The dog ran here and there, and presently struck the trail of the marquis when he entered the hall. D'Ajuda had left by a different way, or the dog would probably have led the others in an opposite direction. He now dashed across the courtyard and into the hall of the building.

Suddenly the animal stopped. Nothing could induce it to move. It stuck its forelegs out firmly, and lifting its head, howled. There was such a pronounced note of despair and fear in that sinister cry that Checkers felt his blood run cold.

It was answered by a far-off, strangely muffled scream.

"Forward, Pedro!" said Keith sternly.

But the bloodhound either would not or could not move. Its hairs bristled along its back, and it shook with terror.

Again that distant cry of agony echoed through the old hall. The sound might come from any part of it. The place was entirely strange to Gordon Keith, and almost as much so to Checkers. Its many corridors, galleries, secret passages, unsuspected rooms, and underground cellars needed hours of search to become familiar with. And that the peril, whatever it was, was deadly imminent was clear from the torture of terror that showed in the bloodhound's trembling body and wildly staring eyes. Only the dog could

give them the immediate guide they wanted, and the dog was paralyzed with fear.

Gordon Keith and Checkers gripped the hound by his collar and strove to drag it forward. It resisted, and turning its head glared backward as much as to say: "Let us get out of this without a second's loss of time!"

"Come along! We must do without its help!" cried Gordon Keith, and he dashed forward.

It was then that Pedro, perceiving its master running to his death, decided that it would die with him. One final howl it gave, then leaped forward on the scent.

"Bravo!" shouted Keith and Checkers in a breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

Miles Oldershaw awoke from his brief period of unconsciousness. Well for him had it lasted longer! Memory, dazed and confused, at first refused to tell him what had occurred. Then he understood.

He looked at the candle. There were three inches of the wax still to be consumed. He had certainly an hour more to live; but if he could at once have annihilated that hour he would have done so, for it was to be one of cruel torture.

Goaded almost beyond endurance, he commenced a long struggle to release himself. The cords sank into his flesh as he wrestled with them. D'Ajuda had done his fiendish work only too well. The tussle ended, and left the prisoner on the point of exhaustion.

He relaxed his aching muscles and sank back with closed eyes. He could not keep them closed. The burning candle drew his gaze, fascinated and tortured. There was but an inch and a half remaining.

He shouted for help, but his voice rang with a hollow, dulled sound, half stifled by the lowness of the stone ceiling and the thickness of the walls.

"No one saw me enter, and no one would come in here after me," he told himself. "If they did they would probably fail to find me. Best be quiet and meet the end with a steady nerve."

For fifteen minutes he remained calm, but he felt a torment of panic threatening his reason.

He cried out at the top of his voice:

"Are you there, you fiend? I agree. You shall have what you want."

The words were meant for D'Ajuda's ears, but the marquis had long been gone.

Oldershaw was able to raise his head, and he endeavored to reach the candle flame by blowing. If he could not blow it out he might, at any rate, succeed in beating it down upon the powder, and so end his sufferings in a fraction of a second of time.

But the light was beyond his power of reaching it that way, and he soon desisted.

Lower and lower burned that tiny flare. There was scarcely an inch of the wax left. That inch would soon be melted; the unsupported wick would topple over upon the powder, and then—

Oldershaw remembered Verna. And at that fearful moment he felt a deep compunction, a harrowing remorse. He muttered, with dry lips:



"I deceived myself with a lie. I told myself that it was because of her bridge gambling that I broke from her. It was not true. I was infatuated with Gabrielle Branza. Yes, I see it now. I was false to you, Verna. Instead of saving you from the clutches of those sharks, I left you. I deserve my fate. Blinded with an insane passion, I forgot you. But that passion is over; that madness is past. I know now that I love you, you only; and if I might ask your forgiveness and receive it in one kiss from your lips, I should not be afraid—even of such an end as this."

He looked again at the candle, and his heart almost stopped as he perceived how frightfully close to the powder had crept the flickering flare. It was so near that it seemed as if its heat, without actual contact, must bring about the catastrophe. What that catastrophe would be, Oldershaw knew only too well. The nature of the explosive compound he was familiar with, for it was of his own manufacture. And he knew that there was enough of the perilous mixture to lift Rat Hall and everything in it upward in one sheet of dazzling flame.

Beads of perspiration rolled down his face. A prayer issued from his dry lips.

It was at that appalling moment that he heard a far-off sound in the old hall, which was like the mournful howl of some great dog.

At once there flashed through his quick-working brain recollection of Gordon Keith's bloodhound which had saved him that very day from a knife thrust. Gordon Keith, then, was in the house—was looking for him.

A shrill cry from the sufferer pierced the silence, and rang in dying echoes through the vault.

"Help! Help! Be quick, for the love of Heaven!"

There was no answering shout. He renewed his piercing calls, but deep silence mocked him. Ah, he had been mistaken! His ears had been mocked as the eyes of one dying with thirst in a desert are mocked by the maddening mirage.

No, there was the sound again—the melancholy howl of a bloodhound. It was followed almost immediately by the rushing of human feet and a loud cry of "I am coming!"

It was the voice of Gordon Keith. A terrible fascination which the sufferer could not resist drew his eyes to the burning candle. And to his unspeakable horror it seemed to him that the flaring wick was even at that moment bending over to its fall.

Convulsed with fear, he cried out, in a husky, strangled voice:

"Go back! Go back!"

At that frightful moment the bloodhound burst into the vault. It stood rigid, its hairs stiff with terror. Gordon Keith and Checkers flew in at its heels. Oldershaw had but strength to utter two words.

"The powder!" he said in what was little more than a hoarse whisper.

A wonderful ability to instantly take in a situation had saved the great detective's life a score of times. Never had he sorer need of that presence of mind than now. His gaze flashed from the prisoner to the cask of black powder, and the tiny smoking flare imbedded in it. He leaped toward it.

Forty-nine men out of fifty, yielding to a first impulse,

would either have blown at the flame or grabbed at the candle end. Gordon Keith did neither. He saw, in that fearful instant of time permitted him, that the least puff would bend the flame down upon the powder; while the tiny length of wax that was left was sunk just below the level of the powder, so that to grasp it was out of the question. The very motion of his hand toward the flame would be sufficient, by disturbing the air, to drive it back upon the compound.

All this Gordon Keith saw, and small wonder that his cheeks blanched the color of death, while Checkers, guessing at the truth, felt his hair stir as if a wind was blowing through it. One leap the detective gave toward Oldershaw, whipped out his ever-ready pocketknife, slashed at the cords, that bound the sufferer, lifted him in his arms as if he had been no weightier than a sack of straw, and rushed from the accursed vault, followed hard by Checkers and Pedro.

Would they do it? It seemed impossible. As they tore along the corridors the flaring wick, almost unsupported, began to lean over. On they flew, death itself grasping at their heels. Through the hall, down the terrace steps, over the courtyard, and then—

There was a deep roar which seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth. One vast conical sheet of fire leaped up, sending myriads of sparks and glowing fragments to the stars, and throwing a lurid and terrible light upon the glen, every tree and bush being revealed distinctly in that holocaust.

The fugitives were hurled to the ground by the force of the explosion. Gordon Keith was the first to rise, Oldershaw, in a deathly faint, being beneath him.

"Ah," said the detective grimly, perfectly calm, though breathing hard, "I can understand why the rats left Rat Hall!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

### D'AJUDA'S LAST BRIDGE HAND.

The Marquis, Raoul St. Anselm d'Ajuda, comfortably ensconced in a corner seat of an up express, fled out of the district as fast as steam could take him. He arrived in town at a late hour and went straight to his hotel. He must have been a man of iron, for he slept soundly, nor was he in a hurry to rise next morning.

He breakfasted at a late hour and read his morning paper. It contained a brief reference to the destruction of an old country mansion called Marshmould Hall. The reporter spoke of a gas explosion as the cause of the outbreak.

"The fool!" muttered the marquis, whose dark skin had paled a little. He crushed the paper into a huge ball and hurled it upon the fire, bit the end off a cigar savagely, and called for his hat and coat.

D'Ajuda called at his club, where he played three games of billiards and won a few pounds. He dined early and took a cab to Lady Greenacres' house in Mayfair. He started with surprise as he perceived Verna Willoughby there, chatting with Lady Greenacres. A few others had arrived, and kept on coming, for this was one of her ladyship's bridge evenings.



He bowed to Verna with a pleading smile which meant "Forgive all for my love's sake!" But his handsome face grew stern with rage as the girl moved away with a glance of detestation.

"I have just been chiding my young friend for keeping away from my house," said her ladyship. "She pleaded heavy losses, but that is silly. To lose one night is to win the next. She listened to me quite like a dutiful child, and I have arranged that she shall have you for her partner, marquis—if you are agreeable."

"I shall be charmed. And you told her so?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! Then I fear she will not play."

"Nonsense! I have arranged the tables, and she will not dare to make a confusion. By the way, marquis, do you know what has become of that pretty countrywoman of yours?"

"To whom do you allude, Lady Greenacres?" answered D'Ajuda, with an affected indifference he was far from feeling.

"Gabrielle Branza, of course. Is it possible that she, also, finds play too high at my house? Well, well, she *will* return, like all the rest do. I have no fear of that. But you must miss her as a partner!"

"I can do very well without her, madam," answered D'Ajuda slowly. "And perhaps I may meet her soon as an opponent."

At that moment two men, one holding the other by the arm, passed by.

"Count!" called her ladyship sharply. "Let me introduce you to my dear friend the Marquis Raoul d'Ajuda! Marquis—Count Leo Borskovitch, and Herr Max Herrmann, the German 'cellist!"

The three bowed, D'Ajuda profoundly uninterested.

Play began immediately afterward. Borskovitch and the German found themselves partners, while the marquis rose and bowed very low as Verna took the chair opposite him. Apparently she had not ventured to disarrange the tables by protesting.

The game had not been in progress ten minutes before D'Ajuda, who had set himself to win a large sum, found that the count and the 'cello player were masters at the game. They were very quiet, and their silence got on D'Ajuda's nerves more than the excellence of their play. He commenced to lose.

The immediate effect of the game upon Verna was to produce a great paleness. This passed, and gave way to a feverish haste and nervousness, which her partner noted with uneasiness. He murmured to himself under his heavy black mustache:

"The fiend! It is certain that I must play as well as these three together—and a little better!"

The result of this exhortation addressed to himself was that the tide almost immediately turned, and the marquis began to win. The first rubber had been to his silent opponents, but he and his partner pulled off the second, then the third.

The count and his partner exchanged a meaning glance. Verna's hands trembled so that she could scarcely hold the

cards. It was the marquis' turn to deal. Collecting the cards, he shuffled, had them cut, and dealt with great rapidity.

"Pardon," said the count, speaking for the first time, and with great deliberateness, "but I do not think you did that quite right."

D'Ajuda fixed a glare upon his opponent.

"What do you mean?" he said, in a low voice.

"Would you rather I explained, monsieur le marquis?" asked the other, with a steady look. "Well, it seemed to me that when you took up the cards you placed four tricks of the last deal at the bottom of the pack. Those four tricks comprised sixteen of the very best cards. I have an excellent memory, and can name each one. I have reason to believe that you retained them at the bottom of the pack. When you dealt you gave to me and my partner the top cards, in the usual way, but to yourself and your partner you dealt from the bottom."

D'Ajuda turned livid.

"That is to say, you accuse me of cheating?" he stammered.

"A half-expressed accusation which I will take back with the most abject of apologies—providing that I do not find every one of those sixteen best cards in yours and your partner's hands. They were the ace and king of diamonds; the ace, king, knave, and ten of clubs; the queen, knave, ten, nine, and eight of spades, and the ace, king, queen, ten, and nine of clubs."

As he spoke his partner, the 'cello player, whipped the marquis' cards from his hand, and flung them face downward upon the table. Verna at once laid hers down.

"Ah," said the count, "there are the very sixteen! Monsieur le marquis, I accuse you of manipulating the cards to your own advantage!"

The words were uttered in a loud tone. Both men sprang to their feet. D'Ajuda was pallid.

"You—you tell me that to my face?" he snarled, choking with passion.

"I do! I—Gordon Keith!" was the unexpected answer. There was a rapid movement of the detective's hands, and Keith stood revealed. The marquis recoiled with a choking cry.

"It is a lie—a conspiracy to insult me!" he panted.

"It is the truth, and I bear witness to it!" cried Keith's partner, making an equally rapid motion of his hands.

D'Ajuda gave one look. His jaw dropped—his eyes almost started from their sockets. He was looking into the face of Miles Oldershaw!

He reeled back and collided with the nearest card table, over which he promptly fell, to the great discomfiture of the players.

Lady Greenacres hurried to the scene. She laid a hand on Keith's arm.

"You promised me, when I agreed to your plot, that you would not make a scene in my room," she pleaded.

"I only wish to denounce that man to the company, and to society, as a sharper!" answered Gordon Keith loudly. "Let him deny it!"

D'Ajuda regained his feet. He staggered to the doorway, brushed aside the hangings, and went out.



"Stay where you are, Miss Willoughby," whispered Keith to Verna. "You have played your part well, but we have not done with that fellow yet." And he went out from the room, followed by Oldershaw.

"He will never show his face in a London drawing-room again!" said Oldershaw, as they waited at the head of the broad stairway.

"Scarcely!" answered Keith grimly. "Unless Checkers and Inspector Moorhen let him slip through their fingers!"

"They are outside?"

"They should be. You will have a sensational tale to tell to a British jury. Can't you imagine the stir it will make?"

"I am almost sorry that we informed the police," said Miles. "I do not want Verna's name dragged into the case."

"Why should it be? There—— Ah, here he comes!"

The marquis suddenly appeared, his hat on his head, and his fur coat thrown over his right arm. To reach the staircase he must pass the men who had humiliated him. At that moment a footman came up the stairs with a telegram on a silver tray.

"For you, sir," said he.

D'Ajuda was just opposite Keith as he took the pink envelope from the tray. He broke it open, absolutely calm, and showing an affected contempt for the two who were watching him by paying not the least heed to either. As his gaze traveled over the telegram, which was a long one, his eyes emitted a flash of joy and triumph. He crushed it into a pocket.

"No reply," said he to the flunky.

The footman retreated, and D'Ajuda turned to Keith and Oldershaw with an insulting smile.

"Good night, gentlemen!" said he, with a mocking bow. "That was a pretty trick you played on me, but he laughs loudest who laughs last!"

"What did he mean by that?" asked Oldershaw uneasily, as the marquis ran lightly down the stairway.

"To answer that question we must see that telegram," answered Keith. "He's gone. Come along and see the fun."

They had secured their hats and coats. As they emerged into the street a loud shouting assailed their ears. They rushed forward.

"Dolts! Idiots!" cried Gordon Keith.

Two police officers had been in waiting for the marquis, armed with a warrant for his arrest on a charge of attempted murder. With them was Checkers, so that there should be no mistake. The keen eyes of D'Ajuda had lighted on Checkers, whom he instantly recognized. In a moment he was on the alert. He saw the two officers advance, but instead of retreating he rushed at them, tripped one, and sent the other smashing up against some iron railings. Checkers sprang forward, but was cleverly dodged. The next instant the fugitive had dashed round a corner, and was racing at the top of his speed.

The two officers were dazed by the violence of the attack—they lost a few precious seconds. Not so Keith and Oldershaw, who, with Checkers, dashed in pursuit. There was

more than a suggestion of fog, and the figure of the hunted man was only just discernible.

Suddenly Gordon Keith, who was leading, appeared to stagger and almost fall. He was up instantly, and continued the chase, but at such diminished speed that the others soon caught him up. They perceived D'Ajuda turn into the quiet road and fling open the door of a moving taxicab. His hoarse shout of "Charing Cross Station!" was clearly heard. The cab started off at great speed.

As it vanished into the fog the two officers came rushing up.

"You saw that taxi pass you?" cried Keith quickly. "Your man was in it! You'll get him at Charing Cross Station!"

A hansom rolled out of the fog as he spoke, and the officers sprang into it and disappeared in hot pursuit.

"Shan't we follow?" cried Oldershaw.

Gordon Keith began to laugh.

"What's the joke? You are amused at the way he upset those fellows?"

"Oh, there was nothing funny about that! I am thinking of the coming expression on the face of that taxicab driver when he stops at the station and finds no one inside his cab."

"What! It was empty?" cried Checkers and Oldershaw simultaneously.

"The marquis went in at one door and out by the other. It was done as only he—and I—could have executed it."

"But you—you saw him, and did not follow?"

"Precisely. Just at present he is of no use to us. We want all our attention elsewhere. The part of witnesses in a police court is the last rôle we can spare time for. That sharp tussle which he had with the police officers loosened the telegram in his pocket. It fell out as he raced on, and I stopped for it, reading it as I ran. It contains startling news, which you, Oldershaw, may explain. Listen!"

Gordon Keith paused under a street lamp, and read aloud as follows:

"I am not what you think me. Where you failed, I succeeded. All is well. Am traveling by fast car to Dover. Shall cross to-night. Meet me there. GABRIELLE."

A hoarse cry broke from Oldershaw. He clinched his fists and struck at the empty air.

"Fool, fool that I was!" he shouted, in a voice of utter despair. "She has betrayed me!"

"Is it possible," said Gordon Keith gravely, "that you trusted that woman with your secret?"

"I gave her the formula," said Oldershaw, wild with grief. "I do not excuse myself. I was the slave of a blind infatuation. And she has betrayed me—has taken this revenge because I broke from her."

"Exactly," said Gordon Keith dryly. "You played with edged tools, my friend. But the game is not lost yet. Let the marquis go, by all means. Our one plan is to meet Gabrielle Branza, as she calls herself, and to meet her before she joins D'Ajuda. A decent car is what we must have."

"And what a friend of mine who lives within three minutes from where we stand will lend me!" cried Oldershaw.

"Come along, then!" said Keith.

The telegram had been dispatched from London—west



district. It was clear that the sender had missed a train, since she would scarcely travel by road on a foggy night with a distinct drizzle of rain in the air. Her pursuers could only hope that she would follow the direct southeast road.

Before twenty minutes had passed they were in the car, with Oldershaw at the wheel, Keith by his side, and Checkers at the back. Until Blackheath was reached and passed they dared not force the pace, for there was a slight congestion of traffic, and the roads were slippery. Once clear of that suburb, however, and they spun along well to Northfleet, covering the fifteen miles in thirty minutes. Here they paused a minute or two to make inquiries, but learned nothing of the other car.

Away they went again, avoiding the direct road through Gravesend. A deathly chilling fog was rolling from the dreary flats south of the river. The powerful lamps could scarcely throw a beam of light through that muffling shroud. His hands paralyzed with cold, Oldershaw surrendered the steering wheel to Gordon Keith. Their speed was by no means fast, yet perilous under the circumstances, and a score of times Checkers gasped as only a sudden application of the brake, or an astonishingly deft turn of the wheel, saved them from disaster.

The lights of Rochester gleamed with a dull glare as they entered upon Coach and Horses Hill. But now the fog was lifting. The car gathered speed, and they roared along at a grand burst into Chalkwell.

Here they received news. A large car, driven by a chauffeur and with a lady passenger, had passed through, straight for Sittingbourne, fifteen minutes back. The information emanated from a local garage, where they had stopped for gasoline. The lady's face was heavily veiled, and she was unmistakably in a hurry.

This was encouraging. The car leaped forward, roared through Sittingbourne, and entered upon a flat stretch of darkened country, with but a solitary light here and there on the horizon. Trees, dripping with moisture, stretched out uncouth arms from the hedges. The road was quite deserted, and the powerful car raced onward with a high cry of speed.

At that moment a loud cry from Oldershaw brought Checkers' attention to the front. He echoed that shout as he perceived a tiny red glow far down the road. It was the tail light of a motor car.

Gordon Keith took all risks. The car throbbed under them as it raced forward.

"What will you do, Keith?" shouted Oldershaw, his hand to his mouth, as they flew along. "We have no right to stop her, after all. What she has I gave her."

A grim smile showed the detective's teeth.

"By word of mouth, or is it in writing?" he shouted back.

"In writing. A complicated formula, which no woman could learn by heart."

"Ah, have no fears, then. I only want to stop her. Didn't I tell you that I met Gabrielle Branza before? There was a little affair at St. Petersburg of which I have but to remind her, and she would give me ten years of her life if I demanded them. Oh, be easy!"

"We are gaining!" cried Oldershaw, intensely excited.

Inch by inch they were creeping up, despite the others' frantic endeavors to draw away. The glistening road streamed under them like a rushing river. The black hedges flew back. The night wind whistled by their frozen ears.

And a quarter of a mile behind, at the bottom of the embankment, the night mail came pounding on, flame glowing from her engine, light streaming from her carriage windows, and a deafening roar of speed from her rolling wheels.

"We have them!" bellowed Oldershaw, wild with delight. "We have won!"

As he half rose in the car, roaring to the fugitives to stop, an unexpected thing happened. To draw alongside the runaway Gordon Keith was compelled to quit the crown of the road. It was a fatal move. The car skidded on the wet surface, gave a half turn, seemed to leap into the air, crashed into and through the brier hedge with terrific force, and hurled itself down the bank.

At the same instant the express came tearing up at a frightful burst of speed.

Keith and his companion threw themselves forward, gripping the steering wheel with a frantic clutch. Fortunately for them, the back wheels of the car caught in the trunk of a thick pollarded oak tree. The tree snapped with a sound like a gunshot, but the stump kept the car in a firm grip.

With Checkers it was otherwise. He was shot clean over the front of the car, turned a double somersault in midair, then rolled down the embankment as if he had been discharged from a catapult. At each turn his starting eyes saw the onrushing locomotive. Wildly he grasped at the bare earth, at loose stones, at thin-rooted weeds. He could not stop himself. His body struck the up metals, and bounded across upon the opposite line.

The express was upon him. One appalling yell he gave, which the driver heard above the outcry of his iron monster. He leaned over the side of the cab, his blackened face suddenly pale. Then he drew back, and his right hand, which had gripped the steam brake, relaxed its hold.

"Wot was it, Bill?" asked his fireman.

The driver drew his oily palm over his forehead.

"I've seen some narrer squeaks in my time," he said, "but none 'arf so narrer as that."

Checkers had rolled clear, and escaped death by the margin of an inch. He staggered to his feet, and was caught in the strong arms of Gordon Keith.

"Thank Heaven!" cried the detective.

"Is—is Oldershaw killed?" gasped Checkers.

"He has broken an arm. I thought I had smashed my breastbone and spine, but I suppose I was mistaken."

"And the other car—it got away?" panted Checkers, trying not to faint.

"Without stopping to inquire after us," answered the detective, with a grim smile. "Heartless, but perhaps, under the circumstances, natural."

"Then we are beaten, after all?" groaned Checkers.

"That remains to be seen," said Gordon Keith.



## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE EARTHQUAKE.

The steam yacht *Albatross*—owner, Miles Oldershaw, and skipper, David Rose—anchored five miles outside Messina Harbor, in a sea that was scarcely ruffled by a ripple.

Three figures lounged in chairs on the after deck.

"That is a wan, wild kind of glare over the town," said the yacht's owner, who had one of his arms in a sling.

"There are volcanoes all along that coast," said Gordon Keith, looking hard where a twinkle of lights showed the sweep of Messina's broad bay.

The red port light of a steamship passed slowly in the distance, throwing the white beams from her saloon far out on the placid sea.

"That is the *Petrel*, gov'nor," cried the third figure on the yacht's deck. "She has landed her passengers at the harbor."

"And the Marquis d'Ajuda, with Gabrielle, among them," said Oldershaw bitterly. "It has been a long race."

"But we shall come up with them in the morning," said Keith. "Do you still persist in your intention?"

"Yes. You tell me that Gabrielle Branza will not dare to disobey you, so that we have her all right. As for D'Ajuda, I shall, as I said, challenge him at once, and I shall rid the earth of a heartless rogue, and incidentally secure his silence, so far as my secret is concerned, with a pistol shot. I am convinced that is the best way."

Gordon Keith sighed.

"Perhaps you are right," he answered; "but you must remember that the marquis is a skilled duelist, and there is a girl in England whose heart would break if anything happened to you."

"Poor little Verna! I remember her always. But have no fears; I—— Merciful Heaven!"

From the distant harbor came a series of crashes, as if a dozen armies had opened battle with heavy artillery. At the same instant the yacht seemed struck by a sudden blow. She shivered through every timber, and her cable parted as if it had been whipcord. Down she sank in a hollow of the sea, while every man on her gazed at each other with whitened faces. Then she rose, towered high on a mighty crest of green water, and was hurled forward as if discharged from a cannon.

At the same moment, mingled with the appalling crashes from the distant shore, came a multitude of agonized cries. A terrible red glare was reflected high to the star-lighted sky.

"An earthquake shock!" shouted Gordon Keith, while he and his comrades gripped the rail for dear life.

"Heaven help those on shore!" cried Oldershaw, gazing with terror-stricken eyes at the mounting fires that were springing up the slopes of the doomed city.

Crash still succeeded crash, and wild, heartrending cries came floating over the uneasy sea.

"A terrible catastrophe has occurred," said the detective. "Oldershaw, you must spare a boat and two or three of the crew. Help is needed over there, if ever help was wanted on this earth."

"Willingly," answered Oldershaw. "I only wish I could go with you, but my arm won't allow of it. We have cabin room for two or three injured, if necessary."

"I knew you would say that," said Keith, gripping the other's hand. "Come along, Checkers!"

Within an hour Gordon Keith was standing face to face with the greatest catastrophe that ever his eyes had rested on. Messina was little more than a pile of ruins and roaring flames, and numberless dead, and wounded screaming for some one to end their miseries.

All that night Keith and Checkers worked side by side, escaping death a score of times. The pale light of dawn broke slowly, and shed a desolate gleam over that scene of ruin and carnage. As for a moment the detective stood upright to ease his aching back and wipe the blood that flowed from his cut hands, he perceived a man standing by a wall of a church—a monstrous, tottering wall that seemed about to fall in one gigantic crash. And yet the man appeared to be oblivious of his peril, for a cigar was between his teeth, he stood in a careless attitude, and seemed to regard the scene about him with more of interest than horror.

"I know but one man who could show such nerve, such calousness," was the thought that flashed through the detective's brain. He went forward, and was within a score of paces of the calm spectator, when the latter turned, and their eyes met.

The man was the Marquis Raoul d'Ajuda!

For three seconds he and Gordon Keith looked into each other's faces. A mocking smile began to lighten D'Ajuda's eyes; it hovered about his lips. He took his cigar in his long, slender fingers, and flicked the ash lightly.

"So we meet again, monsieur," said he. "Were you hoping that the earth had swallowed me as it has done so many poor wretches here? Bah! I have a charmed life, and if——"

They were the last words that the marquis ever spoke on earth. With an appalling roar the entire wall heaved over, and buried him under its enormous stones.

\* \* \* \* \*

The steam yacht *Albatross* sailed for England a fortnight later, its work of rescue and succor over.

"I made many inquiries for Gabrielle Branza," said Gordon Keith, looking back to where the breaches in the broad front of the coast showed, and will show for many a day, "but could find nothing about her. The chances are that she was killed. I shall be surprised if we ever hear more of her."

His words were a true prophecy. Dead or living, the beautiful Sicilian was never seen from that hour by the detective or Miles Oldershaw. The latter wedded Verna a month later. Gordon Keith and Checkers attended the ceremony at St. George's, Hanover Square.

"The closing stage of a remarkable case, Checkers," said Keith.

THE END.

The story to appear in next week's issue (No. 374) is a particularly good one. It is called "Bert Fairfax's Pluck; or, The Trials and Triumphs of Schoolboy Life."



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## THE LAST ACT.

"BRENT'S FORT, July 12, 18—.

**M**Y DEAR BROTHER: Jennie's father is dead. He died yesterday from illness contracted by exposure during his last trip. His dying request was that I would hasten the union between Jennie and myself—not let his death delay it, but rather shorten the interval.

"I cannot leave here in time to make the trip to Selkirk and return before winter sets in; so the only alternative is for Jennie to come to me. You are the only person to whose care I would intrust her on the perilous journey that it is necessary to make to reach here. Bring her yourself, George, and you will add to the obligations we both already owe you.

"Inclosed is a letter for her. Deliver it, and from that moment treat her as the brother you will be when we are married.

"To your care I intrust the dearest treasure I have to guard from many dangers. I will leave here in six weeks to meet you at the Lone Hemlock, and there await your arrival, knowing I will only remain such a time as events over which you have no control separate us.

"Give my love to Jennie, and do all you can to console her in this, her first great affliction. Your aff. bro.,

"CHARLES."

"Well, I never opened a letter with greater, or closed one with less, satisfaction. Commissioned to pilot a young lady thirteen hundred miles, where every mile is fraught with danger of some nature. Alone, I would feel no hesitation, but with a young lady to guard, half my energies would be paralyzed, and half the avenues of escape closed to both." After a moment's pause the speaker added: "But Charles wishes it, the circumstances seem to demand it, and, if Jennie will venture it, I will do it, although I sacrifice many fine prospects."

The person here introduced was George Coleman. Although young in years, he was probably one of the most extensively known of those bold spirits whose courage and daring had made undying reputations in the Great Northwest. He and his brother, the writer of the letter just read, had for six years been conspicuous among brave men and were reputed the most fortunate and successful of hunters, trappers, guides, or scouts. By far better educated than the mass of men engaged in these exciting but dangerous pur-

suits, their uniform good fortune had made their names the synonyms of safety and success.

For the first time in their lives the brothers had been separated for several weeks in succession. A desire to rejoin Charles was the main incentive which prompted a speedy acquiescence in the request contained in that letter, although it was at considerable personal sacrifice he did so.

"I will take this letter to Jennie, although I shall feel as if I were inflicting this wound myself, when I would save her from a single grief at any sacrifice. She must know it, and the sooner her sorrow begins the sooner she will recover that calmness which is sure to follow."

This determination was carried into effect, and we will leave him to visit Jennie's home before he arrives.

A snug little cottage, standing by itself in a quiet little grove, was the home of Jennie. Two rooms were all that it could boast, but those two were paradises of domestic happiness, and gave evidence of being presided over by one of those domestic blessings so seldom found and so little appreciated. She had never known a mother's care, being deprived of it at an age when memory was not strong enough to retain even a recollection of her.

In this quiet home, yet unvisited by a single grief, sat Jennie, her little hands busy upon some item that was intended to bring forth an expression of gratification from her father, whose return she was anticipating almost any day. A knock at the door brought forth a welcome, expressed in most musical tones, and the door opened, admitting George Coleman.

"Why, George, I am so glad to see you," was Jennie's greeting as soon as she discovered who her visitor was. "You are such a stranger that if I were not dying to talk to some one, I should feel that propriety demanded an introduction before I felt at liberty to commence. What have you been doing the last week? You know you promised Charles to be a brother to me while he was away. Now, could you look him in the face, after leaving me to myself for five days, and you in the village all the time?"

"I know I have not been as attentive as a brother should be, but very important business must plead my excuse," answered George.

"Now, don't make excuses; I won't hear them; but sit down and try to make amends for your long silence. When do you expect Charley?"

This sudden broaching of the subject rather threw George off his guard, and the appearance of a certain restraint was plainly visible and detected by Jennie at once.

"What is the matter, George?" she inquired. "You are not naturally so unsociable and uneasy. What has occurred? I begin to think you have avoided me for some other cause than 'important business,' as you call it. Come, tell me."

"Jennie, I have a letter from Charley," he said, and added: "I am going to Brent's Fort to see him."

"What, is he not coming here? He said when he left he would be back before summer was over. Here it is almost gone, and you talk of going to him. George," she added, in evident alarm, "something has happened to Charley. This is the cause of your melancholy. Tell me," and in her excitement she caught him by the hand and gazed steadily into his face, "tell me the truth—tell me the truth."

"Here is a letter for you," he answered, turning his face from her, unable to stand the quiet pleading of such eyes. "It will tell all, and may Heaven give strength to support you in the trial."

His voice was too full of emotion to be steady; his eyes again were averted. She looked at him for a moment, and dropping the hand she held, gently fell into a seat.

"I will not read it. I know all, now. I feel all. I see all—why you go—why Charley does not come. He has forgotten, he has deserted me. I will not read it—I will not read it."

"What, Jennie!" George exclaimed, almost in anger. "You say he has forgotten you. No, no! On the contrary



he writes me to bring you to him, as he cannot come. Now dry your eyes, and read his letter while I go and see Tom, who brought the letters from Charley."

The momentary return of joy visible in her brightening eyes was soon replaced by the return of anxiety, and in half-frightened accents she called him back to her.

"He wants me to come to him," she said. "George, a terrible suspicion influences me—father! You have heard of him—you turn your eyes from me. I see it confirmed—my father is dead!"

"Yes, Jennie," he answered, now recovering his composure that the worst was known and nothing left to conceal, "but do not let unavailing grief waste energies that will soon be needed. We will not talk more now. Read your letter alone and in silence. I will soon return, then we will try and talk calmly of the future. In the meantime, Jennie, remember I am your brother, from this hour. You must look to me for guidance and protection until we meet Charley, for, if it should be the last act of my life, I will place you safely under his care."

Jennie cried as if her heart would break. George placed her unresisting form in a chair, and left her to sorrow and herself, hoping that the flood of tears then coursing down her cheeks would quench the anguish in her heart.

That evening all was settled. In two days Jennie bid adieu to the happy home of her childhood. Bitter tears rained from her eyes at parting from the many scenes endeared by association with all she held sacred of the past. Motherless and fatherless she was, but not friendless.

George succeeded in inducing Tom to return to Brent's Fort with him. The party was also increased by the addition of a stranger, an Irishman.

Many and sincere were the good wishes that followed them as they left the village. Not one of the little band about to venture upon this dangerous expedition but carried with them the heartfelt prayers of all who knew them, that they might reach their destined home in safety.

The party were well equipped, each one according to their individual tastes. Jennie and George were mounted, the former upon a pony, compact and powerful, the latter on a horse which had carried him safely on many expeditions of equal danger. Tom and the Irishman on foot could bid defiance to the best-blooded stock in the world on a journey of a thousand miles through the wilderness. All felt confidence, and Jennie, relying implicitly upon the courage and experience of George and Tom, both well known to her, could not look upon the frank, open countenance of her Irish protector and doubt his courage.

The first few miles were traveled in silence. George would not interrupt the quiet sorrow which settled upon Jennie, until she saw fit to speak herself. They rode side by side, he ever attentive to her comfort. For this day, at least, they were free from apprehension of danger, and rode on in peace. Hills and ravines were passed, streams crossed, until some fifteen miles had been traversed, before the stillness that reigned between Jennie and George was broken by the former.

"George, I feel more contented than I have at any time since you broke to me the news of father's death," were her first words. "It is sad to know we shall meet no more on earth, but I will try and avoid the utterance of useless regrets. I will be as cheerful as possible, but don't avoid me any more; speak to me as you used to."

"I will, Jennie," replied George. "And now ask if it would not be best to halt at the next stream for dinner. It will not do to tax your strength too severely at first. I will call Tom and tell him if you consent."

"Do what you think best. I am under your care, and rely entirely upon your experience. You will be my faithful monitor until relieved by Charley, then," she added playfully, "you must settle down into the dear good brother I know you will be, and we then will never part again, for we have had a sad lesson in parting."

The tears started afresh in spite of her.

George rode forward and made arrangements for their first meal in the woods, which was soon prepared, and eaten with a relish which is the product of healthy exercise like theirs.

Each succeeding day was passed as this one was. Nothing occurred to alarm them in the least, and they all felt as if a special Providence was watching over them amid the dangers of the journey.

Each night George, Tom, and the Irishman kept faithful vigil alternately. Jennie was braving the fatigues as only a lady brought up far from the demoralizing, enervating influences of superlatively refined society could endure them. Everything was propitious, even to the weather, which had been of the brightest, balmiest description.

The morning of the twenty-seventh day out opened bright and beautiful. The party were rapidly journeying on, when Tom, who had just reached the top of a hill, for the first time awoke the long-silent echoes of the forest with a loud cry of exultation. Jennie, almost frightened into jumping from her pony, was soon quieted by George informing her that it was not an enemy whose voice had broke the stillness of the wood, but Tom.

"Why did he do it?" she asked, half deprecatingly; "he might have known it would frighten me. I declare, I feel almost nervous enough to have hysterics, if it was not such an inconvenient place to appear to advantage. But," she added, with genuine alarm, "what if it reached other ears than ours?"

"You are right, Jennie," George replied. "It was thoughtless, and I blame myself as the cause to a certain extent. I would never forgive myself, or Tom, if through our indiscretion anything should happen, now we have safely reached this distance." After a moment's silence he added: "I will tell you why Tom gave vent to this sudden ebullition, as now you will be apt to find it out at any rate, and I may as well make a virtue of necessity, although I would have preferred letting you discover it yourself—the surprise would have been more agreeable."

"An agreeable surprise in this out-of-the-way place! What can it be?" she asked. "Come, tell me—I am all anxiety, now, you may be sure. I will try and forgive you, although you know it was wrong to keep anything from me, and I hope now you see the bad effects of it."

"Charley is now at a point visible from the hill where Tom is, and the sight of that elicited from Tom the cry of satisfaction you heard. It was wrong, I know—"

He ceased speaking here, for his auditor was flying ahead like an arrow. Not wishing to disturb the stillness already too thoroughly tried for safety, he judiciously refrained from calling out, but quietly urged his horse forward until he regained a position at her side. But the little bundle of feminine obstinacy would listen to nothing, and kept steadily on up the hill. Arriving at the top, she reined up by the side of Tom and his companion.

"Where is he?" she eagerly asked; and turning to George, added: "Oh, it was kind of you to keep this pleasant surprise until just before it was realized."

"I am afraid you will retract all you have said of my kindness when you learn the whole," remarked George, adding: "You are still liable to disappointment owing to your uncourteous conduct in leaving me so unceremoniously before I had finished."

"Don't punish me for that," she cried; "I could not help it—it was the pony's fault; but tell me where Charley is, that I may see him before he does me."

"Look at that dark green spot on the horizon, as far as the eye can reach. Charley is there. But, my little runaway," he continued, "we have more than eighty miles of tiresome travel before it is reached. I would have spared you this disappointment if I could. Now all that can be done is to hurry forward as fast as possible."

Tears were gathering in her eyes, and with a sigh that



almost reached the magnitude of an "indiscretion" in a region where silence and extreme caution alone can give hope of safety, she quietly resumed the route.

For some hours their course was down an inclination, as the point just passed was the highest in the circuit of many miles. The place pointed out as that where Charley Coleman was, if no untoward event had prevented him reaching it, was marked by a mammoth hemlock. This remarkable tree reached an altitude of nearly three hundred feet. Its conical-shaped top towered far above the surrounding trees, and the deep green of its foliage was conspicuous even at this great distance. It was known as the "Lone Hemlock," and the only one to be seen in that region. Situated above eight hundred miles from Selkirk, and four or five hundred from Brent's Fort, it was used as a landmark by all travelers in this wilderness.

That night was the last passed in peace by that little band of pilgrims.

The night of the twenty-ninth day out was an eventful one. Although extreme vigilance had not been relaxed, those who were asleep were aroused before dawn from dreams of happiness and security, where the mind was far from regions peopled with danger, by the ever-terrible cry of savages bent upon blood and slaughter.

George's first impulse was to recover his rifle and reach Jennie. He found her sitting up, bewildered and hardly realizing the condition affairs had suddenly assumed. He led her away to a spot of concealment without being discovered. This proved to be near where her pony was picketed, which, through a whim of her own, she always insisted upon having near where she slept. He instantly saddled it and raised her to the seat. Shots were being fired rapidly at the point they had just left. The voices of Tom and Callahan could be plainly heard cheering each other. The Indians had not yet discovered the absence of George and Jennie, and their two companions were evidently keeping them busy.

Telling Jennie to remain quiet and not move from where he left her, George informed her of his intention to return and try to gain possession of his horse. He knew with her upon his hands he could render no assistance to his comrades, so he determined to seek safety for both in flight, if possible to get his horse again.

"Should you have to fly, Jennie, keep the rising sun, already tinting the sky, on your left; it will take you to Charley and the hemlock. I will follow on foot if I do not succeed in getting my horse."

With these injunctions he left her.

As he approached the horses, not yet stampeded, he was about to mount his own, when an Indian interposed himself with uplifted hatchet. A blow from George's clubbed rifle placed him beyond the power of doing harm. In a moment he was upon his horse, and, with no trappings but the picket thong, hurriedly returned to where he had left Jennie.

She was gone; but he caught sight of her vanishing in the dim morning light, followed closely by an Indian on foot.

The little animal's most vigorous strides were needed to hold its own in this race with the fleet Indian. Jennie courageously urged him forward, keeping the course directed.

George followed, and could easily have removed that solitary obstruction from his path, but a rifle shot would have brought others down upon them, and feeling that every yard placed between them and the scene of conflict was so much added to their chances of escape, he let the Indian follow undisturbed. Soon it might be necessary, but until it was he would hesitate about firing.

Jennie looked around but once, and the little cry of joy told plainly she felt succor was at hand.

George's horse soon attracted the Indian's notice, and brought forth a whoop that was answered from several in his rear.

No use of hesitating longer, and, with unerring aim, a bul-

let freed that Indian's soul from its earthly covering, and it joined its former companions in the "happy hunting grounds" of the red man.

George gained the pony's side, and together they pressed forward. An occasional appealing glance from Jennie's eyes was answered by one that spoke plainly as words:

"I said I would take you to Charley, and I will, if it is the last act of my life."

On they rode. The sun was rising bright and clear—red as the blood not yet ceased flowing from mortal wounds gaping at their late camp ground. The Indians still pressed forward in pursuit.

George urged with all his power the slowly failing energies of the pony, but it was doing its utmost, and patiently galloping its life away in efforts to save the precious burden under which it staggered.

Three of the pursuers had fallen already beneath the unerring aim of George, but others seemed to rise to fill their places. Two of them had rifles, and those were the object of George's attention. Arrows at this distance were harmless, in a great degree, and those using them were not molested, not being considered of sufficient importance.

One of them, emboldened by the immunity enjoyed, gained a position sufficiently near to send a random arrow, which lodged in the pony's leg. This, piercing the tendon, closed for a time that little animal's career of usefulness.

Jennie was now lifted from the pony and placed in front of George. The strong animal faithfully struggled under this double load, lengthening the period of suspense, but holding out no hope of escape.

Encumbered as he was George could not use his rifle, although he retained it. Slowly the Indians gained, and soon the bullets began to fly about them. At length one marked by fate to do this deed, placed Jennie's guardian beyond the hope of human aid.

Without a murmur he received the fiat of destiny, but groaned to think so soon the trembling form inclosed in his fast-loosening embrace would be without a protector.

"Jennie, it is the last act, and I have failed."

Feeling his inability to retain his seat upon the horse much longer he yielded the single rein to Jennie, bidding her keep on with the sun to her left, which course would bring her to Charley and the "Hemlock"; then he quietly slipped from his seat, and they parted, the horse under full gallop.

Hardly had his dying form reached the ground, when shots, followed by shouts from several mounted men, fell upon his fast-fading senses, and he saw galloping toward them a force that promised safety to Jennie, if he was beyond their aid.

One only of the advancing body drew rein, and that was Charles. Seizing Jennie's horse by the bridle he transferred her now fainting form to his own horse, and then proceeded to where George had fallen. Dismounting and laying Jennie gently on the ground, he bent over his dying brother. Raising the head upon his knee, he spoke gently to him, and only received for answer:

"Charley, good-by. I told Jennie I would place her in your arms if it were the last act of my life, and—I—have—done—it."

A solitary mound beneath the "Lone Hemlock" marks the last resting place of George Coleman.

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